

A LITTLE  
GALLERY OF  
ENGLISH POETS



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A LITTLE GALLERY OF  
ENGLISH POETS



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# A LITTLE GALLERY OF ENGLISH POETS

THE PORTRAITS REPRODUCED FROM AUTHENTIC  
PICTURES, THE LIVES WRITTEN BY

HARRY CHRISTOPHER MINCHIN

*379318*  
*20.4.40*

BARDS OF PASSION AND OF MIRTH,  
WE HAVE LEFT YOUR SOULS ON EARTH!  
WE HAVE SOULS IN HEAVEN TOO,  
DOUBLE-LIVED IN REGIONS NEW!

KEATS

METHUEN & CO.  
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.  
LONDON

*First published in 1904*

PR  
503  
M46

TO  
MY SISTER



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## PREFACE

IT being desired to present the reader with authentic portraits of twenty of our chief English poets, it was felt that the collection might be more acceptable if accompanied by a brief attempt to trace also the features of their several careers, and to suggest the nature of their several claims to an earthly immortality. The pictures reproduced are of undeniable authenticity ; and my first object has been to invest the verbal sketches of their originals with that quality. It would be a mistake to cumber the pages of so slight a work as this with the repeated citation of authorities ; but I wish here to assure the reader that no statement of fact is advanced which cannot be substantiated from the most trustworthy sources. It would be tedious to enumerate those sources, and I should have to begin with the works of the poets themselves, for these have given my sketches whatever atmosphere they may possess ; but I ought to say that in the case of Shakespeare, where so much is disputable, I have been, with one minute exception, entirely guided by Mr. Sidney Lee's *Life*, to which I desire to express the sense of my indebtedness.

Exigencies of space have not allowed me to include all known incidents in each poet's life, or to furnish a complete list of his works. I have limited myself, in either sphere, to what seemed to me of paramount interest or significance.

I am conscious that the title of this book is open to criticism, for not all the poets who look out from its pages were Englishmen. Nevertheless they expressed themselves in the English language; and although the best work of Burns is enshrined in his vernacular poems, yet I trust no Scotsman will grudge his inclusion in this little volume, if only for the reason that he is in excellent company. The absence of Marlowe prevents me from asserting that the chosen twenty are actually the twenty greatest names in English poetry, but of him no portrait is known to exist. Even so the list, as it stands, may not satisfy everyone; but to draw up such a list is, perhaps, impossible. The survey, it should be added, did not include living writers. Grateful thanks are owed to the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, which is the source of many of our pictures; to the Rev. S. Baring-Gould for permitting the reproduction of Spenser's likeness; and to Mr. B. Vaughan Johnson for consenting to the inclusion of his portrait of Cowper.





Chaucer

# A LITTLE GALLERY OF ENGLISH POETS

## CHAUCER

1340 (?)–1400

THE title of “The Father of English Poetry” was long since bestowed on Geoffrey Chaucer. His right to it may be questioned, if we are to speak by the card, for Layamon and Langland preceded him in this field. Yet when we consider the superiority of his workmanship to theirs, the greater volume and variety of his production, and his incomparable service to our language at a critical period, all but the merest precisians must admit that if the title is to be denied to Chaucer it had better be abolished altogether.

A mist of uncertainty still obscures a few occurrences in Chaucer’s life, as well as the date of his birth. Dryden calls him the Homer of our literature; and had the Germans worked their disintegrating will upon him, as they have upon Homer, there is no saying to what attenuated proportions the career and

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personality of the poet might have been reduced. But those who have studied his history most deeply, among whom Sir Harris Nicolas is chief, have worked upon more constructive lines, and it is now possible, thanks to their investigations, to give a coherent account of Chaucer's life, while not professing to unravel all its perplexities. This reservation is applicable to the biographies of several of our older poets. It is not to be expected that one from whom we are separated by the gulf of several centuries should be as exactly limned as "he that died o' Wednesday."

Geoffrey Chaucer was the son of John Chaucer, citizen and vintner of London, who accompanied Edward III. on an expedition to Flanders in 1338. He was probably born in London, and certainly passed his childhood there. His father had a house in Thames Street, and the boy would no doubt play with his companions about the busy wharves, where later

"Geoffrey Chaucer's pen  
Moved over bills of lading,"

and find food for reverie in the foreign ships and shipmen of the port. It is not recorded where he got his schooling, nor whether he was at either University. In *The Miller's Tale* he shows acquaintance with Oxford, in *The Reeve's Tale* with Cambridge. But what is certain is that he became, by whatever means, a man of wide and varied learning—

a good Latin, French, and Italian scholar, well read in divinity, and proficient in astronomy and chemistry, so far as those sciences had then advanced. Moreover, he was soon to have the benefit of whatever refinement the Court could give ; for in 1357, the year after Poictiers, he became a page in the household of Prince Lionel, and must have witnessed many sumptuous festivities, amongst them those at John of Gaunt's first marriage. Two years later he accompanied his master and the King to France ; and, though there was no fighting, he managed to get taken prisoner. The King paid a part of his ransom, and took him into his service.

In the course of his new employment Chaucer fell in love, very probably with a lady above him in rank : at any rate, she rejected him. This we gather from the *Compleynte to Pite* (Pity), his first poem. It was a long trouble—

“ Trewly as I gesse,  
I hold it to be a sickënes  
That I have suffred this eight yere” ;\*

but he put it away from him at last. In 1372 he was sent to Italy on the King's matters, and was absent for a year. He may now have made acquaintance with Petrarch. This journey must have been a welcome distraction to Chaucer, while to us it is a proof of the estimation in which he was held. On his return Edward gave him a small pension and

\* *Deathe of Blaunche the Duchesse* (1369).

made him Comptroller of the Customs to the port of London. He also received a pension from John of Gaunt. Somewhere about this time he married, and settled in a dwelling-house above the gate at Aldgate, which was to be his home for the next twelve years. His time was now divided between his duties at the port and poetical composition, varied by an occasional mission to France or Flanders. *The Flower and the Leat*, a poem of great delicacy and beauty, had already appeared: during these years he wrote *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowles*, *Troylus and Cresseide* (written in that noble seven-lined stanza, the "Rhyme Royal"), *The Legend of Good Women*, and a few stories afterwards included in *The Canterbury Tales*. These works are largely coloured by the poet's study of Italian literature. The accession of Richard II. brought him a second post at the Customs, with leave to appoint a deputy—a seeming privilege, destined to issue in misfortune.

One would like to think that Chaucer, with the genial and happy temperament which in general pervades his writings, and gives them an atmosphere of mellow sunshine, was happy in his married life. But if words mean anything, especially the words of his *Envoy to Bukton*, the opposite must be concluded. This drove him more and more into himself and his studies.

" For when thy labour all done is,  
And hast made all thy reckonings,

Instead of rest and of new things  
 Thou goest home to thine house anon,  
 And all so dumb as any stone  
 Thou sittest at another book  
 Till fully daséd is thy look,  
 And livest thus as a hermit.”\*

Yet, cheerless as his home life was, Chaucer's public prospects seemed bright enough when, in 1386, he entered Parliament as Knight of the Shire for Kent. Before the year closed there came a rude awakening.

The young King, who began so well, had grown unpopular owing to his extravagance and favouritism. A cry for retrenchment was raised. Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, Richard's uncle, put himself at the head of the discontented, and became practically sovereign. Richard's ministers were dismissed, and at the Customs, in answer to loud complaints of mismanagement, a clean sweep was made. Chaucer's livelihood was gone. About this time, also, his wife died. He raised money on his pensions and went (in 1388)—there is no reason to doubt it—on the memorable pilgrimage to Canterbury.

Next year the kaleidoscope shifted: Richard shook off his uncle's yoke. He was a patron of the arts, and perhaps loved Chaucer none the less for the fact that the poet could admonish him on occasion:—

“O prince, desire to be honourable,  
 Cherish thy folk and hate extortion.”†

\* *House of Fame.*      † *Ballade of Lack of stedfastnesse.*

At any rate, he promoted him to new offices, making him Clerk of the Works at Westminster and at St. George's, Windsor. It is probable that Chaucer did not prove himself a good man of business; at any rate we find him superseded two years later. However, the Earl of March made him Forester of North Petherton Park, in Somerset, a post which allowed of the appointment of a deputy, and in 1394 King Richard gave him a grant of £20 for life. Chaucer was now occupied upon *The Canterbury Tales*, and resided successively at Woodstock and at Donington Castle, near Newbury; but there is evidence that his finances, from whatever cause, were in a bad way, and his health was beginning to fail. When Henry of Lancaster dethroned his cousin, Chaucer sent him his *Compleynte of his Empty Purse*, and the new King doubled his pension. Chaucer died in London within the year, probably on the 25th October, 1400. He left one child, the "litel sonne Lowis" (born in 1381), for whose advancement in astronomy he composed his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.

Beautiful as are many of the minor poems, *The Canterbury Tales* are of course the poet's crowning achievement. *The Prologue*, where contemporary life is reflected as in a mirror, is purely English; and though many of the *Tales* are of foreign origin, Chaucer has given them a flavour of his own country, just as Plautus romanised his Hellenic models. Chaucer has revealed himself in his works with re-

markable fulness. The reader is constantly made aware of a gentle and unassuming personality, humane, pitiful, often indeed satiric, as in the case of the chartered impostors of religion, but never unjust or unkind, as close an observer of the external world as of humanity, whose love of books was only exceeded by his love of nature. What a wealth of tender observation is in that one line,

“Upon the small and soft and sweeté grass” ! \*

Not one of our poets shows a more spontaneous love of nature, which to Chaucer was unfeignedly the garment of “the Almighty Lord.”

“Hearkeneth these blissful briddés how they sing,  
And see the freshé flourés how they spring :  
Full is mine heart of revel and soláce.” †

His poetry is full of these heartfelt outbursts. And as to his fellow-men, he was quite alive to the evil that is in humanity, but none more delighted to exalt its good, wherever found.

“Look, who that is most vertuous alway,  
Privé and pert (open) and most entendeth aye  
To do the gentil dedés that he can,  
Taketh him for the grettest gentilman.” ‡

\* *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women.*

† *The Nonne Prieste's Tale*, ll. 380-2.

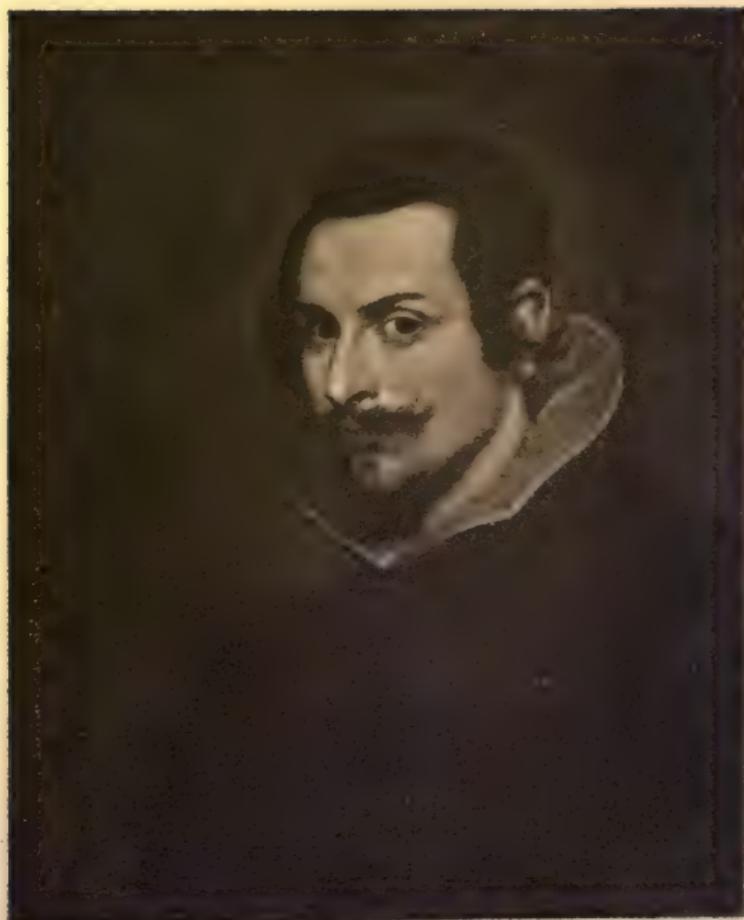
‡ *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, ll. 257-60.

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And none has loved more than he to celebrate the virtues of good women; witness the fortitude of Constance, the patience of Griselde, Lucretia's chastity. It is true that some of the *Tales* are coarse and impure; but no man can wholly dissociate himself from his age, and both in heart and intellect Chaucer was generally far in advance of his.

The reader is recommended to compare the poet's portrait with the Host's description of him in the *Prologue to the Rime of Sir Topas*. Would that we had a likeness of him in his younger days!





*Spenser*

# SPENSER

1552-1599

IT adds lustre to the fame of Chaucer that Edmund Spenser, the first great English poet to arise after his death, was his avowed disciple. So far did Spenser's admiration for his master carry him, that he set himself to copy his phraseology. The result is not, in his earlier works, invariably happy. The archaisms of *The Shepherd's Calendar* are sometimes rugged and unpleasing ; but with practice these faults disappeared, and harshness is the very last quality that could be predicated of *The Faery Queen*, which yet is everywhere reminiscent of the older speech. Indeed, so many of his successors have avowed their indebtedness, no less to the splendour and variety of Spenser's diction than to the wealth of his imagery, that he has been fitly called "the poets' poet."

He was born in London, but Hurstwood, in Lancashire, was the cradle of his race. He was educated at Merchant Taylors' School and Pembroke Hall (now College), Cambridge. The depth and range of his studies are amply indicated in his poems. He was poor, and delicate ; and with these drawbacks

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acquainted with Shakespeare, are pleasantly described in *Colin Clout's come Home againe*.

Back in Ireland, he fell in love a second time. Of Rosalind's successor "one name was Elizabeth," and the other, as seems likely, Boyle. The course of Spenser's love is portrayed in his *Amoretti*, a volume of sonnets. It appeared at first as if Elizabeth was to be as disdainful as Rosalind, but the poet's constancy was at last rewarded. He married Elizabeth Boyle in 1594, and his happiness is attested in the magnificent *Epithalamion*.

As a married man he no doubt desired more than ever to establish himself in his own country. On that errand, as well as for the publication of three more books of *The Faery Queen*, he again crossed St. George's Channel. He now made prolonged efforts to obtain a post from the Crown, which were quite unsuccessful. At this time, he tells us,

"sullein care  
Through discontent of my long fruitless stay  
In Princes' Court, and expectation vayne  
Of idle hopes, which still doe fly away,  
Like empty shaddowes, did afflict my brayne." \*

He returned to Ireland for the last time, out of health, it is said, and surely out of spirits. Next year Tyrone's rebellion broke out. Spenser's castle was fired over his head: he just escaped, with his wife and

\* *Prothalamion*.

four children, and made his way to London—only to die there. The hardships of his flight may well have hastened the end. At the time of his death he was in receipt of a pension and the bearer of important despatches—facts which are in themselves sufficient to explode the fable that he “died for lack of bread.”

Beautiful and interesting as are Spenser’s minor poems, *The Faery Queen* is, of course, of paramount importance. The six books which he completed, out of a projected twelve, compose one of the longest poems in the language. They form a Christian allegory, of the loftiest tone, written to commend and illustrate the virtues of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. The design is imperfect, but this, as was well said by Campbell, is forgotten in the magic of the colouring. *The Faery Queen* presents a series of practically independent narratives. The knights and ladies whose adventures are recorded are legendary figures ; but several of them are to be identified with the great ones of the poet’s day.

# SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

“ Oh for a muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention ! ”

THIS aspiration befits one who presumes to speak on so great a theme as Shakespeare. But since it is breathed in vain, he can only reap where others have sown, and soberly set down such particulars of the poet's life as their patient scrutiny has verified. Several incidents, such as the killing of the deer, are dependent on tradition ; but in these cases reasoned inference has shown tradition to be credible.

The surname Shakespeare was not uncommon in the Middle Ages throughout the midlands and the north of England. The poet came of a good yeoman stock. His father, John Shakespeare, was a man of substance in Stratford-on-Avon, a dealer in all kinds of agricultural produce, who held various municipal offices. The poet was the eldest of four brothers, all of whom attended the free grammar-school at Stratford. All the formal tuition which he can be shown to have had was there received ; and though he left



Shakespeare



school at the age of thirteen, he left it, thanks to his quick wits and his "good sprag memory," with a serviceable knowledge of French and Latin. He might have stayed longer, but his father's affairs were becoming involved, and the son was required to help him in his business. The next known fact in his career is his marriage, which took place when he was in his nineteenth year. Late in 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, and their first child, Susanna, was born in the May of 1583. In 1585 twins were born—Hamnet and Judith—and within a few months their father left Stratford, and for eleven years saw little of his wife or children.

It is probable that several considerations conduced to this momentous step. The family fortunes were at a low ebb, and the poet now conceived that purpose of restoring them which he was to achieve so triumphantly. The conjecture may be hazarded that had he been at more complete accord with his wife he would have been less ready to leave her: but it is gratuitous to suppose that during his absence he did not contribute to her support and that of his children. The consciousness of the possession of creative power must also have impelled him to seek a wider sphere than Stratford. The poaching affair at Charl-cote and the threatened vengeance of Sir Thomas Lucy (who may safely be identified with Justice Shallow) gave the final impetus.

For London, then, he set out, in search of fame and fortune, doubtless faring afoot, as Johnson and Garrick did a century and a half later. His earliest shifts in London must remain as obscure as Johnson's; but in no long time he was admitted to the Company of Players, licensed by the Earl of Leicester, who were then acting at The Theatre, later at The Rose, and, after 1599, at The Globe. This company, after enjoying the protection of various noblemen, was promoted, on the accession of James I., to be the King's Players; it presented all but two of Shakespeare's plays; and the poet remained until his retirement in 1611 one of its regular actors, as well as its chief dramatic author. He is said to have been an excellent player; but as to the parts which he sustained, there is only recorded mention of his playing Adam in *As You Like It*, and the Ghost in *Hamlet*. His greatest dramas were produced at The Globe, and Richard Burbage "created" all the leading characters.

Shakespeare began his career as a dramatist by recasting the plays of others, a recognised and legitimate occupation, which, however, drew upon him the jealousy of established playwrights such as Greene and Peele, who regarded him as an interloper and an ignoramus. Greene talked of "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers," and of "a Tyger's heart wrapt in a player's hide." Shakespeare took

little heed of these attacks, which no more hindered his onward course than the boulders on the shore check the incoming tide, beneath whose waters they are presently submerged. He was soon in the full career of dramatic composition, borrowing his subjects freely from all available sources, and in the process investing with immortality much that otherwise had been forgotten. The plays were acted, and for the time laid aside; it was the publication of his two longer poems, both dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, which first impressed his contemporaries with his poetic genius. The *Sonnets*, consequently, which he now privately circulated among his friends, aroused a widespread curiosity, which Thomas Thorpe, a piratical bookseller, set himself to gratify. By means, probably, of one William Hall, an assistant to a stationer, Thorpe procured a copy of the *Sonnets*, and published them without the consent of their author. There is good cause to think that the "Mr. W. H." to whom Thorpe dedicated them, over whose concealed personality controversy has raged so long, was no more important person than this unscrupulous stationer's assistant. As to the matter of the *Sonnets*, there has been no less divergence of opinion; but it is apparent that they can only be interpreted in the light of a prevailing fashion, of which they are the brightest flower—the fashion of addressing a powerful patron in terms of exaggerated flattery and devotion.

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In those days every poet was a sonneteer; Shakespeare was indebted to Southampton, and had no scruples in seeking to retain his favour by the approved method. The more deeply the *Sonnets* are considered, the less valuable as fragments of autobiography will they appear.\*

From his earnings as actor and playwright Shakespeare was now making a handsome income. He returned to Stratford in 1596. The immediate cause may have been the sickness of his son Hamnet, who died on August the eleventh of this year. The poet finally relieved his father's embarrassments, and signalled his own prosperity by applying for a coat of arms, which was in due course granted. From this date until 1611 he paid a yearly visit to Stratford, and now purchased and restored New Place, the largest house in the town. In 1599 his fortunes were further improved, for he became part owner of The Globe and bought an estate of over a hundred acres close to Stratford. By this time the bulk of his Comedies and Chronicle Plays had been written; and concurrently with his shrewd transactions in business the maturest works of his imagination were produced—*Julius Cæsar* in 1601, *Hamlet* in 1602, *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* in 1604, *Macbeth* in 1605, *Antony and Cleopatra* in

\* This subject is so large and complicated that it is impossible to deal with it here with any approach to adequacy. The reader is referred to Mr. Sidney Lee's masterly exposition.

1608, and *Coriolanus* in 1609. Then came *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*; and as *The Tempest* is the last play that Shakespeare wrote, it is perhaps not too fanciful to discern a personal note in Prospero's farewell to his art.

The last five years of the poet's life were spent at Stratford, though he occasionally visited London. He lived to see the birth of a grandchild (Elizabeth Hall) and the marriage of his younger daughter, Judith. The nature of the malady which caused his death has not been ascertained with certainty.

Of his extraordinary intellectual gifts his works are the fittest exponent; but the oft-quoted estimate of Dryden is so admirable that it will bear citation once more:—

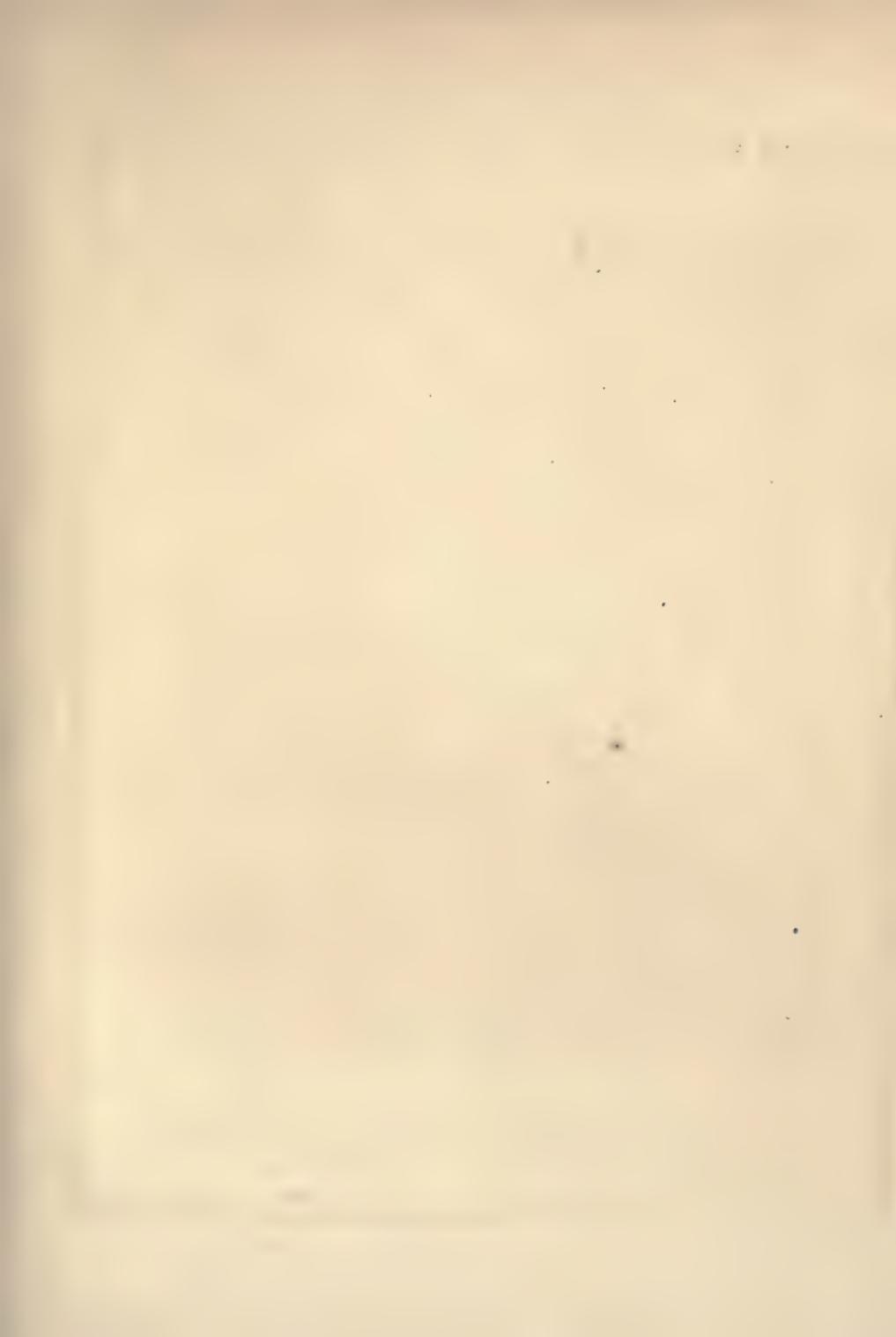
“Shakespeare was the man who, of all modern and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily: when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.”

As to his temperament, from contemporary records and from the few controversies in which he was involved we judge him to have been upright, kindly, genial, and placable. If he was conscious of his

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towering genius, he certainly betrayed himself by no assumption of superiority.

The Droeshout portrait, which is here reproduced, is almost undoubtedly contemporary and authentic, and the very picture which was engraved for the First Folio (1623). The engraver robbed the portrait of a good deal of its character.





Jenison

# JONSON

1573-1637

**I**N the later days of Benjamin Jonson the young writers who flocked about him, Herrick and Suckling among them, were proud to be known as his "sons," and he used to speak of them as having been "sealed of the tribe of Ben." One may fancy that their filial affection was tempered with some awe, for he was ever a formidable person, combative and saturnine, with a gift of caustic speech which he was at no pains to check, and with small inclination to brook rivalry or opposition.

The scion of a Border family, his strenuous and turbulent disposition was the chief part of his inheritance. His father, who was *armiger* and therefore "gentle," died before his son's birth, and the mother gave her boy a step-father who is described as a master-mason or bricklayer. But William Camden, the antiquary, was more truly his foster-parent, for he secured his admittance to Westminister School, where he was himself then second master. Jonson took to his studies greedily, and though he does not appear

to have pursued them at either University, he managed to amass such stores of learning as place him among the most erudite of English poets. Moreover, his powers of observation were as remarkable as his application to his books. In the crowded life of London there was little that escaped him, few "humours," that is, peculiarities, which his retentive memory did not absorb.

When his schooldays were over he was made clerk in his step-father's office, but he broke apprenticeship (being set upon another sort of masonry), and fled to Flanders, where he saw service in the wars. He told Drummond of Hawthornden that he fought and slew one of the enemy in single combat, in the sight of both camps ; but Jonson's statements, as recorded by Drummond, are to be received with caution. He certainly killed a fellow-actor in a duel, some years later, and narrowly escaped hanging. That was after his return from Flanders, when he had joined a company of players and was employed like Shakespeare, both as an actor and a furbisher of old plays. He had also married, but his children, two sons and a daughter, died young : and if he lived with his wife it was with intervals of separation, one of which, by his own account, lasted five years.

When he was in prison after the duel he became a Roman Catholic, but subsequently returned to the Church of England. This duel, however, was for

another reason a turning-point in his life. It led to a quarrel with Henslowe, his manager. Jonson threw up his occupation of patching old romantic dramas, and wrote a play of his own on a very different plan. This was *Every Man in his Humour*. It was produced by the company to which Shakespeare belonged, and had a great success.

Jonson's first comedy is written on those dramatic lines to which throughout his career, with one unimportant exception, he conscientiously adhered. At the date of its appearance (1598) the romantic drama, exemplified by the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare, which laughed at the restrictions of space and time, was at the height of its popularity. To Jonson, saturated with the theatre of the ancients, it seemed monstrous that two acts of a play should be supposed separated by a dozen years or some hundreds of miles. He deliberately chose to bind his own genius fast with those dramatic fetters known as "the unities." Most people are tired of hearing about "the unities." Whatever else "the unities" can do, they cannot make a dramatist. Jonson, however, demonstrated that there was room for a revival of classical correctness side by side with the triumphs of romanticism. For the rest, *Every Man in his Humour* evinces both the learning of its author and his extensive and minute observation of contemporary manners. The best and most living of its characters are Captain Bobadill, the swashing

coward, and Justice Clement, "the old merry magistrate." Its defect is lack of beauty; but beauty is rarely found in Jonson's plays.

Other dramas followed in quick succession: *Every Man out of his Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *The Case is Altered*. In these pieces Jonson sets up as castigator of the follies and vices of his time; and he spoke with such force and plainness that he brought a storm of invective and anger about his ears. He retorted in the *Poetaster*; but presently thought fit to lay aside satiric comedy for awhile and try his hand at tragedy. *Sejanus* was the outcome, a tragedy as ponderous as it is classical, which, however, won for its author the friendship of Lord D'Aubigny, who proved his regard by giving Jonson the freedom of his home for some five years. Meanwhile James I. had begun his reign, and Jonson showed his versatility by celebrating the event in *The Masque of Blackness*. Shows and pageants were at this period much in fashion, and Jonson composed a great number of masques for the Court and for noble families. The learned King made the learned bard his poet laureate. For a dozen years he was in high favour at Court, though his position and perhaps his life were once momentarily endangered by his share in *Eastward Ho*, a comedy which gave offence by its unfavourable criticism of the Scottish nation. During this period, too, his other principal dramas were written, *The Silent Woman*, *The Alchemist* (the Abel

Drugger of this piece is said to have been one of Garrick's best parts), *Catiline*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. In 1618 he went to Scotland, travelling on foot, and stayed some time with Drummond, the Scots poet, who has left a record of his conversation. An honorary degree from Oxford and a pension from the King could not make up for the loss of his library, which was destroyed by fire about 1620. *The Forest* and *Underwoods* are the titles of his miscellaneous poems, and *Timber, or Discoveries*, contains his prose reflections upon arts and men. In 1626 he had a severe illness, the effects of which were lasting ; there is a palpable decline in the plays of his last decade, which Dryden calls his "dotages." Want, moreover, threatened him ; but Charles I. came to his relief, and his closing years were not neglected. It should be added that he was the friend of Shakespeare, and that, though on occasion an adverse critic of his dramatic methods, he penned a noble panegyric in his memory.

Beneath the weight of *Ætna*, so runs the fable, the giant Typhoeus lies imprisoned. Every time he turns in his uneasy sleep the mountain vomits smoke and flame. So it is with Jonson : encumbered with the weight of his learning and his analysis, he gives forth fire indeed, when the creative instinct stirs him, but smoke and smother too. He seems, like Milton's lion, "pawing to get free" ; and in the brief intervals of captured liberty gives utterance to lyrical out-

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bursts—"See the chariot at hand here of Love," "Queen and Huntress, chaste and fair," "Still to be neat, still to be dressed," "Underneath this sable hearse," and a dozen others known to lovers of poetry —of a charm and freshness that are wanting to the laboured efforts of his erudition and his realism.





*Milton*

# MILTON

1608-1674

**I**F anyone should question the truth of Ben Jonson's saying, that "a good poet's made as well as born," no more valid evidence could be quoted in support of it than the life of Milton. For John Milton, who from the dawn of his maturity believed himself set apart for the composition of a great poem, which after times "should not willingly let die," devoted the best years of his manhood to the preparation of his mental and moral powers for this task—with what triumphant success all the world knows.

He was the son of a scrivener, and was born in Bread Street, Cheapside. His boyish studies at St. Paul's School were characterised by a self-imposed intensity. He proceeded to Christ's College, Cambridge, where he fell out with the authorities over some matter of discipline ; but, however punished, he took his degrees in the regular course, and left Cambridge with the regrets, as he tells us, of the Fellows of his College. Milton does not seem to have been in love with his University, nevertheless

he was in residence for seven years. The next six he passed with his parents at Horton, in Buckinghamshire. He had been intended for the Church, but had decided that he could not submit himself to ecclesiastical trammels. His father, who had an unquestioning belief in his son's genius, was well content that he should not burden himself with a profession. Milton, accordingly, was able to prolong his studies in an environment wholly favourable to his poetic growth. The quiet and restful happiness of these years is reflected in the poems which he wrote at Horton, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus*, and *Lycidas*, works which though regarded by himself as mere trial flights of his muse, would alone have been sufficient to ensure him a high rank among English poets. The first three have nothing of the Puritan except his lofty moral standard. The author appears as one delighting in the beauty and seclusion of the country, yet not averse from music, the theatre, and social intercourse. The masque of *Comus* leaves all compositions in this manner far behind. *Lycidas* is one of the tenderest of elegies; though towards its close it sounds a clarion-like note of impending conflict. There was yet, however, a lull before the storm, and Milton set out to visit Italy, still at his father's charges. The learned of Italy everywhere welcomed the English poet who could talk to them in Latin and Italian, and could on occasion write verses in their language. The beauty of a dark Italian lady

furnished the occasion. Milton was a sojourner at Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. He seems to have been most at home in Florence, where he saw Galileo, "grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition." He had meant to extend his travels to Sicily and Greece, but in the summer of 1639, on learning that affairs at home pointed to the approach of open strife, he set out on his return to England. The period of preparation was over; twenty years were to elapse before the period of achievement.

It is not to be supposed that during this interval his great purpose was forgotten. But Milton ruled his life, if ever man did, "as ever in his great Task-Master's eye," and he conceived it his duty to devote his energies and his pen to the political cause which he had espoused, which was indeed, with all its shortcomings and extravagances, the cause of liberty. He set himself to educate his nephews and a few more pupils in the principles of civil and religious freedom. He poured forth a host of partisan pamphlets, which have all the faults and all the merits of that class of literature; the *Areopagitica*, however, or plea for the liberty of unlicensed printing, is deservedly remembered and esteemed. He was continually engaged in controversy. Now, too, he made a bid for domestic happiness, and lost it. In 1643, after a short absence from London, he brought home a bride to his "pretty garden-house in Aldersgate." She was Mary Powell, a cavalier's daughter. The match was

hastily arranged, and seemingly against her inclinations. At any rate, in a month's time she went on a visit to her home in Oxfordshire, from whence she refused to return. Conjecture has devised various theories to explain her action. Be the cause what it may, Milton's spirit was stirred to its depths. If she would not be his wife, he would at least be free to choose elsewhere. He wrote two fiery pamphlets in favour of divorce, which filled the Presbyterian world with horror. They had no other effect; but in two years' time a reconciliation was brought about, probably through the wife's relatives. Milton was also magnanimous enough to shelter her parents, on the sequestration of their property after the fall of Oxford. Mary Milton became the mother of his children, dying, however, in the summer of 1652. Meanwhile, on the fall of the monarchy, Milton had become Secretary of Languages to the Council of State. His work was varied and arduous, and already his sight was threatened, but he never spared himself. Besides his official toil of translating and composing despatches, he undertook to reply to Gauden's *Eikon Basiliké* and to Salmasius' *Defensio Regia*, an indictment of the English republicans. Then his over-tasked eyesight finally gave way. Plunged in complete darkness, he was never more to behold

“ Day or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,  
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine.”

He bore the blow without flinching. He retained his office, with Andrew Marvell to assist him, and his controversial vigour. In 1656 he married again, happily, as a beautiful sonnet—there is no other evidence—assures us, but lost his wife within two years.

At the Restoration he naturally forfeited his post, and was for a time in some peril. The storm, however, blew over, and he retained life and liberty, though he lost the greater part of his fortune. Still, he had enough left to satisfy his wants. Though his sight was gone and his cause ruined, his will was as indomitable as ever. There was yet time to achieve the great purpose of his being. He had probably begun work upon *Paradise Lost* a year or so previously. It was completed by 1665, and by 1670 *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* were also composed. Where, in the history of Letters, is there a parallel to this achievement of a blind and ageing man?

Milton's lines were taken down by friends, at his dictation. Upon his daughters he imposed the task of reading aloud to him from books written in languages which they did not understand. It is hardly surprising that they found this occupation irksome. "Milton," says Dr. Johnson, with witty exaggeration, "thought woman made only for obedience, and man only for rebellion." Milton's daughters thought otherwise. They rebelled against an uncongenial routine, and left their father's house several years before his

death. It is a satisfaction to know that his third wife, Elizabeth, showed a proper regard for his comfort and well-being. The poet was busy with fresh literary projects when the gout, which long had troubled him, "struck in" and killed him. He was buried, near his father, in the chancel of St. Giles's, Cripplegate.

It is as impossible to close without reference to the majestic march of Milton's greater poems, to the loaded magnificence of their diction, and to their flawless harmonies, as it is to say anything new of these perfections. Criticism has long since assigned him a place among our poets second to Shakespeare's only ; there, in reverence and silence, let us leave him throned.





*Dryden*

# DRYDEN

1631-1700

**I**N the later years of the seventeenth century there sat of afternoons at Will's coffee-house a short, stoutish man, noticeable for a certain natural dignity, of fresh complexion and rather sombre look, sparing of his conversation, but speaking, when he did speak, with an air of authority. The company paid him every mark of respect; in the winter his elbow-chair had the best place by the fire, in summer the best place on the balcony; and on all literary questions which arose his judgment was received as final. This was Dryden, "glorious John Dryden" (as one of Scott's characters calls him), and the story of his life, as it is known to us, is almost entirely the story of the literary works which raised him to this acknowledged eminence.

He was born at Aldwinkle, in Northamptonshire, the son of a small landed proprietor, and was educated at Westminister School—his name may still be seen carved on one of the benches there—and at Trinity College, Cambridge. In after years he reflects rather

ungraciously upon his University, saying of himself—

“Thebes did his green, unknowing youth engage,  
He chooses Athens in his riper age”—

but the lines occur in a prologue to the University of Oxford, and Dryden was past-master of the arts of flattery. In the year that he took his degree (1654) he became by his father's death the owner of a small estate, but chose to reside in London. A few shorter poems had already appeared, and the *Stanzas to the Memory of Oliver Cromwell* display considerable power; but the Restoration and return of Charles II. gave him, in *Astræa Redux*, a more congenial theme. These events, too, reopened the playhouses. Dryden's means were small, and here was an opportunity of augmenting them. It is to his monetary requirements rather than to any felt aptitude or particular liking for the stage that the long series of his plays is due. His first attempt, *The Wild Gallant*, a comedy, proved a failure, but matters were soon reversed, and for some fifteen years he wrote a series of successful dramas, sometimes as many as three in a year. He had formed a friendship with Sir Robert Howard, a fellow-author, and in 1663 married his sister, Lady Elizabeth Howard. There were three sons of the marriage, and Dryden showed himself a good father. From May, 1665, to December, 1666, the theatres were closed, owing to the plague and the fire. Dryden occupied

himself with writing *Annus Mirabilis*, the Year of Wonders, a poem on the Dutch War and the fire of London. In 1670 he was made poet laureate in succession to Davenant, as well as historiographer, with a salary of £200 a year and a butt of sack. James II. afterwards docked the latter item. In 1679 he was waylaid and beaten by bravos as the reputed author of a satire in which Rochester was defamed. Lord Mulgrave was the actual author, but the disgrace was held to attach to Dryden, not to those that set his assailants on—a damning indictment of the perverted conscience of the age. In 1681 appeared *Absalom and Achitophel*, a violent onslaught upon the Whig party and Lord Shaftesbury, its chief, followed next year by *The Medal, a Satire against Sedition*. Shadwell, a rival dramatist, retorted in *The Medal of John Bayes*. Bayes was a nickname that had stuck to Dryden since the production of *The Rehearsal*, a satirical skit upon his dramatic methods, of which the notorious Duke of Buckingham was partly the author. It is probable that Shadwell repented of his temerity, for Dryden immediately replied, and in *MacFlecknoe, a Satire on the True Blue Protestant Poet, T. S.*, has exposed his luckless opponent to everlasting ridicule. About the same time, that his own views might not be misunderstood, he wrote *Religio Laici*, a defence of the Anglican position. It is characteristic of Dryden that he was never at a loss for arguments in support

of any opinions which he chose to maintain. The author of *Religio Laici* joined the Romish Communion soon after James II.'s accession, and in *The Hind and the Panther* gave the world an elaborate defence of his new creed.

After the Revolution Dryden was deprived of his office of laureate, and had the mortification of seeing Shadwell installed in his stead. But nothing is more admirable in his life than his courage under misfortune. Old age was approaching, but he worked harder than ever. He wrote *Don Sebastian*, one of the best of his heroic plays, translated Juvenal, translated Virgil, wrote *Alexander's Feast, or, The Power of Music*, and produced his *Fables*, a splendid piece of hack-work, consisting of a number of translations from Boccaccio and modernised stories from Chaucer. The *Fables* were published in March, 1700. On the 30th of April a London journal announced that "John Dryden, Esq., the famous poet, lies a-dying"; and at three o'clock on May morning he passed peacefully to his rest.

Dryden is not a great imaginative poet; he is, first and foremost, a poet of the reason. "His genius," says Dr. Johnson shrewdly, "was commonly excited by some personal regard, he rarely writes upon a general topic." His chief poems deal with events and controversies of his day, and are crammed with political references and allusions. These are often obscure, and most readers prefer poetry which does

not need a commentary. Everyone knows his sketch of Buckingham as Zimri, but how many have read *Absalom and Achitophel*, admittedly his masterpiece, from beginning to end? It is a tradition to admire Dryden, and there the matter often stops. This is a pity, for although his themes are sometimes such as another writer might have preferred to treat in prose, they have come down to us in verse, and the verse is Dryden's. That is equivalent to saying that they are handled in a fashion almost invariably cogent and often brilliant. There is a noble profusion about Dryden's writing; he never economises his strength, because he has no need to do so. It is true that he is unequal, and is at times capable of surprising bathos and flatness. This may partly be accounted for by the fact that he wrote hurriedly, and did not trouble to revise what he wrote. Perhaps, too, excellent critic as he was of other men's work, he was not equally acute where his own was concerned.

Satire is not the highest kind of poetry, but among English satirists he is easily first. In his heroic plays, of which *All for Love* is considered the best, there are many admirable passages, as well as a great deal of rant and fustian. He professes himself aware of their faults in this particular, "but I knew," he says, "that they were bad enough to please, even when I wrote them." His comedies are indefensibly gross, and more than once offended by their license, even in that licentious age. He himself in his later years, both

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publicly and in private, expressed regret that he had written them. He has an admirable prose style, easy, natural, and lucid. His many *Prefaces* are full of interest, and bear the stamp of his vigorous personality. The best of his prose, notably his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, is worthy to take rank with the best of his verse.





Pope.

# POPE

1688-1744

TO pass from Dryden's works to Pope's is like leaving "a careless-order'd garden" for a conservatory. In Mr. Pope's hothouse you will find no pains have been spared to dress up nature to the best advantage. You will be called upon to admire the triumphs of the horticultural art. To look for even the fairest wild flowers in such a place would be, of course, unreasonable.

Though a native of London, Pope spent little of his youth there. At eight years of age he was put under the care of a priest in Hampshire, (his parents being Roman Catholics,) from whose tuition he passed to a Roman Catholic School at Twyford, near Winchester. Here he satirised the master, was whipped in consequence, and taken away by his father. Then followed a short period of schooling in London, during which he once got a sight of Dryden, who was the object of his boyish reverence. At twelve a serious illness, which left him delicate for life, put an end to his schooldays. His father, who was a linen-draper, had now given up business and gone to live

at Binfield, in Windsor Forest. Hither the boy was taken, and here he continued his studies, reading widely, writing translations of much that he read, and thinking himself, as he admits, "the greatest genius that ever was." His precocious cleverness began to be recognised, and he presently formed friendships with men of mature years, among whom were Sir William Trumbull, a neighbour and ex-Secretary of State, and the veteran Wycherley. With Wycherley, however, he soon quarrelled ; this was the first of the literary squabbles which were to disfigure his life. In 1709 his *Pastorals* were published, though written, so he tells us, five years before. Formal and conventional as they are, they were much admired. In 1711 appeared his *Essay on Criticism*, a remarkable performance for so young a man, clear, forcible, and epigrammatic. It brought him the acquaintance of Addison, who next year printed Pope's *Messiah* in the *Spectator*. At the same date was composed *The Rape of the Lock*, the most original and perfect of all his poems.

Two Roman Catholic families living in the neighbourhood of Windsor had become estranged owing to an injudicious pleasantry : Lord Petre had cut off a lock of Miss Arabella Fermor's hair. Pope, who was acquainted with both houses, was asked to write a poem which should put the matter in a ludicrous light, and so make resentment give place to laughter. It is not certain that *The Rape of the Lock* had this

effect, but in its kind the poem has no rival. It is a marvel of grace and polish, and the novel agency of the sylphs, or spirits of the air, is employed with admirable skill. No other of Pope's works is informed with such fresh and pleasing fancy.

That his inventive powers were of a limited order may fairly be inferred from his next enterprise. It would seem that in the age of Anne there were more of "the great" and "the polite" who desired to become acquainted with Homer than could read him in the original. An eighteenth-century Homer was required, and Pope undertook the task. His *Iliad* cost him five years' labour. It is a fine and deservedly popular English epic. Bentley described it—with truth—as "a pretty poem, but not Homer." Pope had not written for scholars, and the *Iliad* pleased his public; but he did not forget Bentley's innocent remark. Homer, however translated—and he added a version of the *Odyssey*, in which Broome and Fenton collaborated—gave him a competence for life. In 1719 he bought a villa at Twickenham, and interested himself in laying out its grounds and constructing a subterranean grotto. His mother shared his home, and in his devotion to her there was a sincerity which his intercourse with most of his fellow-creatures too often lacked. No one professed to value friendship more than he, but Pope's friendship was a dangerous possession, as Addison testified. There were no limits to his venom when he con-

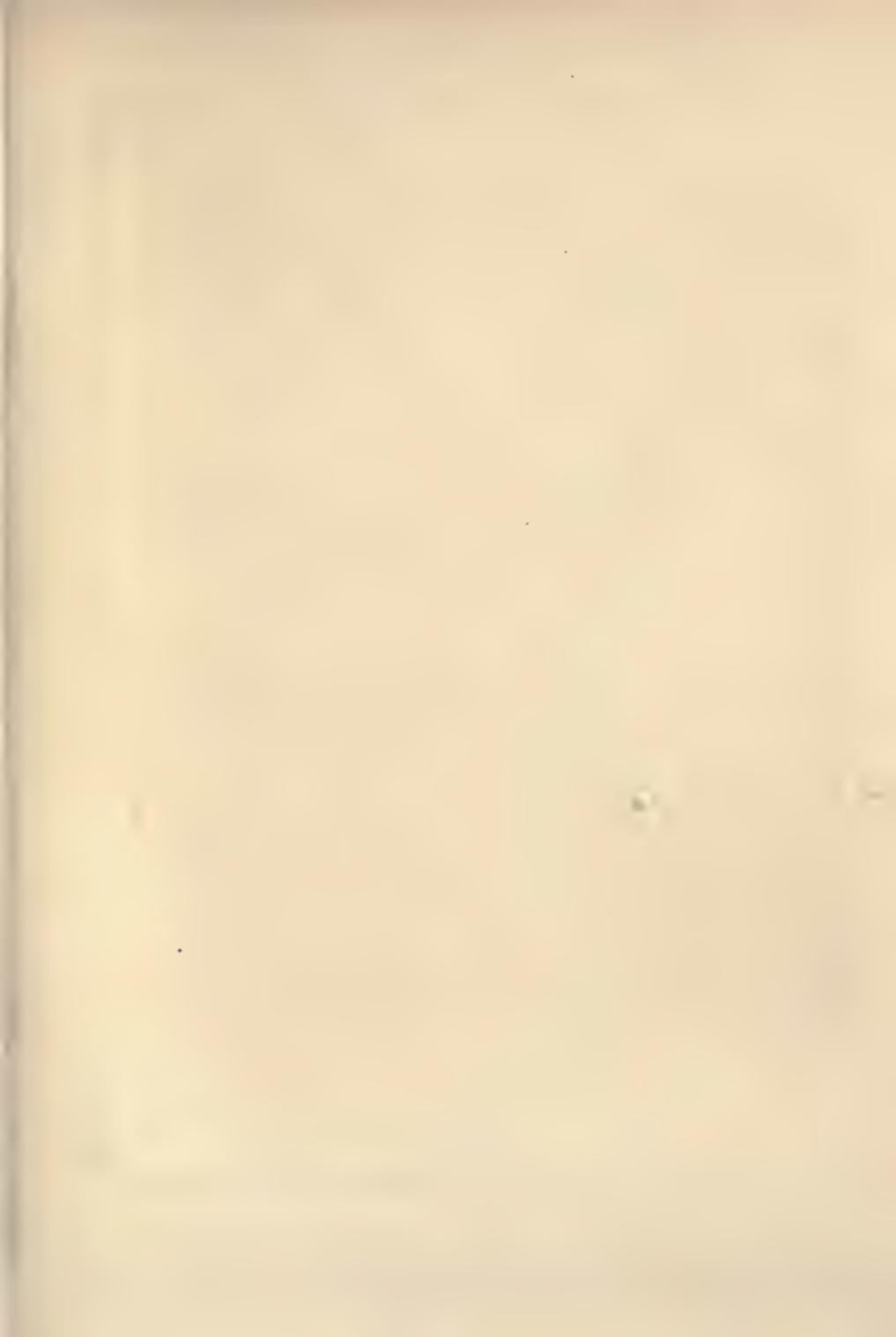
sidered himself affronted. He long made a goddess of Lady Mary Wortley Montague; but they quarrelled, and he assailed her, in print, with the vilest imputations. The key to Pope's many disputes, which it is unprofitable to consider in detail, is to be found in his inordinate vanity and morbid sensitiveness. Such was his craving for notoriety that he stooped to the pettiest artifices in order to get his letters printed during his lifetime, even condescending to deceive Swift, who was one of his best and oldest friends. Friends, no doubt, he had whom he did not jockey in this unhandsome way—Parnell, Gay, Arbuthnot, and others—but it is hard to forgive his admitted treacheries. At the same time it should be remembered that he was perpetually harassed by infirmities of body, which may well have given an unwholesome tinge to his mind. His success as a poet incurred the jealousy of lesser versifiers, yet though any attack upon himself or his works gave him the acutest pain, such was his love of lashing others that he could not refrain from assailing scribblers who should have been beneath his notice. "What Virgil had to do with Maevius," he wrote to Swift in 1723, "that he should wear him on his sleeve to all eternity, I do not know." Yet he himself fell into precisely the same error. In his *Bathos, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*, he gave the bad poets a preliminary basting, mainly in order to provoke them to retaliation, and so have a good excuse

to flay them—as he then, in the *Dunciad*, proceeded to do. The first hero of this remarkable poem is Lewis Theobald (Cibber afterwards shared “that bad eminence”), who incurred Pope’s hostility by some unfavourable criticisms of his edition of Shakespeare, of whose text he afterwards proved himself the most brilliant emendator. Bentley is also derided, but the bulk of the castigated are the small fry of Grub Street, a fact which to-day makes the *Dunciad* somewhat wanting in vitality.

There are not many more events to record in Pope’s life beyond the publication of his various poems, and these are almost exclusively reflective and didactic. He had never married, and in 1733 he lost his mother. His friendship with Miss Martha Blount was probably a lifelong solace, though here, too, he must be for ever “playing the politician.” He loved to move in an atmosphere of artifice. “He hardly drank tea,” Lady Bolingbroke declared, “without a stratagem.” Ill-health debarred him from foreign travel, but he visited at the country houses of his friends. He had formed a close intimacy with Bolingbroke, whose opinions are reflected in *The Essay on Man*. The system of this metrical treatise constantly breaks down, but it is full of good things by the way. Much the same may be said of the *Moral Essays*. To Pope’s last considerable work, the *Imitations of Horace*, except that they are disfigured by the Lady Mary blot and a few other

enormities, unstinted praise is due. Every one of these "Satires and Epistles" teems with interest. Perhaps an individual preference may assign first honours to the *Epistle to Augustus* (George II.) with its masterly survey of English poetry. Certainly, as his life drew to a close, Pope could look back upon a vast amount of solid achievement.

His maladies gradually increased in intensity, and death came as a relief. "There is nothing that is meritorious but virtue and friendship, and, indeed, friendship itself is only a part of virtue." Such was the last and characteristic utterance of Alexander Pope.





Gray

# GRAY

1716-1771

THOMAS GRAY was born in London, the son of a successful man of business. The impressions of childhood are far-reaching, and the unhappy circumstances of his home may have intensified the tendency to melancholy which, together with a weak constitution, seems to have been his inheritance at birth. Of twelve children he only reached maturity. His father was a man of violent and tyrannical temper, whose sanity was afterwards questioned, and the boy was taken away by one of his uncles, Robert Antrobus, who lived at Burnham, in Buckinghamshire. From thence he went to Eton, at his mother's expense, his father refusing to have him educated. Gray was a studious boy, with little taste for games or exercise, but he seems to have enjoyed Eton, where his chief friends were Richard West, a lad of great promise, and Horace Walpole. In 1734 Gray was entered at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and Walpole next year at King's. Meanwhile his father's violence had grown so unbearable that his mother sought protection from the law. No redress was

obtained, but the appeal may possibly have done something towards bringing the husband to his senses. Gray was deeply attached to his mother, and this trouble undoubtedly weighed upon his sensitive nature. He does not refer to it in his correspondence, but from letters written to West, who was now at Oxford, it is evident that his spirits were depressed; nor did the course of study at Cambridge please him, for he abhorred mathematics. He went down from the University in 1738, without taking a degree.

But a better time was coming. On the 20th of March, 1739, he set out with Horace Walpole on a long continental tour. Horace was paymaster, Gray accompanied him as his friend, and was to be absolutely independent in his actions. Gray is one of the best of English letter-writers, and has left a charming account of their travels. Walpole, as the Prime Minister's son, had good introductions, and in Paris and the great provincial towns of France they were welcomed by the best society. Gray's low spirits for the time were exorcised. In the first week of November they crossed the Alps, suffering considerable hardships from the cold, and losing Walpole's pet spaniel, which, as it trotted beside the chaise, was carried off by a wolf before the eyes of its distracted master. There was not so much social diversion in Italy, but they gave themselves up to the study of the arts. In April, 1740, being then at

Reggio, the friends fell out, as fellow-travellers will. They parted, and Gray went on his way alone, eventually reaching London on September 1st, 1741. The quarrel was not made up until 1744. Many years afterwards Walpole took the whole blame of it upon his own shoulders.

Two months after Gray reached England his father died. He had dissipated most of his fortune, and his widow, with her two sisters, settled at Stoke Poges, in Buckinghamshire. Gray returned to Cambridge to read law, probably without any serious intention of practising: for though he took a degree in civil law in 1743 he continued to reside at Peterhouse, giving himself up to that wide and thorough course of study which led to his being described later on by a contemporary as "perhaps the most learned man in Europe." He passed his summer months at Stoke Poges, and visited at friends' houses, particularly those of William Mason, his future biographer, and Dr. Thomas Wharton, an old school-fellow. Richard West had died in 1742, to Gray's intense grief. He could never afterwards hear West's name mentioned without betraying signs of agitation.

The first of Gray's poems to appear in print was the *Ode on a distant prospect of Eton College*. This was in 1747. Next year his *Ode to Spring* and lines *On a favourite Cat*—the cat was Walpole's—as well as the Eton ode, were included in a miscellany published by Dodsley. The *Elegy in a Country*

*Churchyard*, his masterpiece, which he began in 1742, but laid aside, was completed in 1750, and sent to Horace Walpole. It was published by Dodsley in the February of the next year, and had a great and immediate success. Four editions were printed in two months. Gray's name did not appear, but presently the authorship leaked out.

The welcome given to his two Pindaric odes—*The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*—was less unanimous. People found them difficult to understand, and they evoked two parodies—an *Ode to Obscurity* and an *Ode to Oblivion*. Any careful reader of Gray's Pindarics must admit that most of the obscurity was in the minds of those who complained of it.

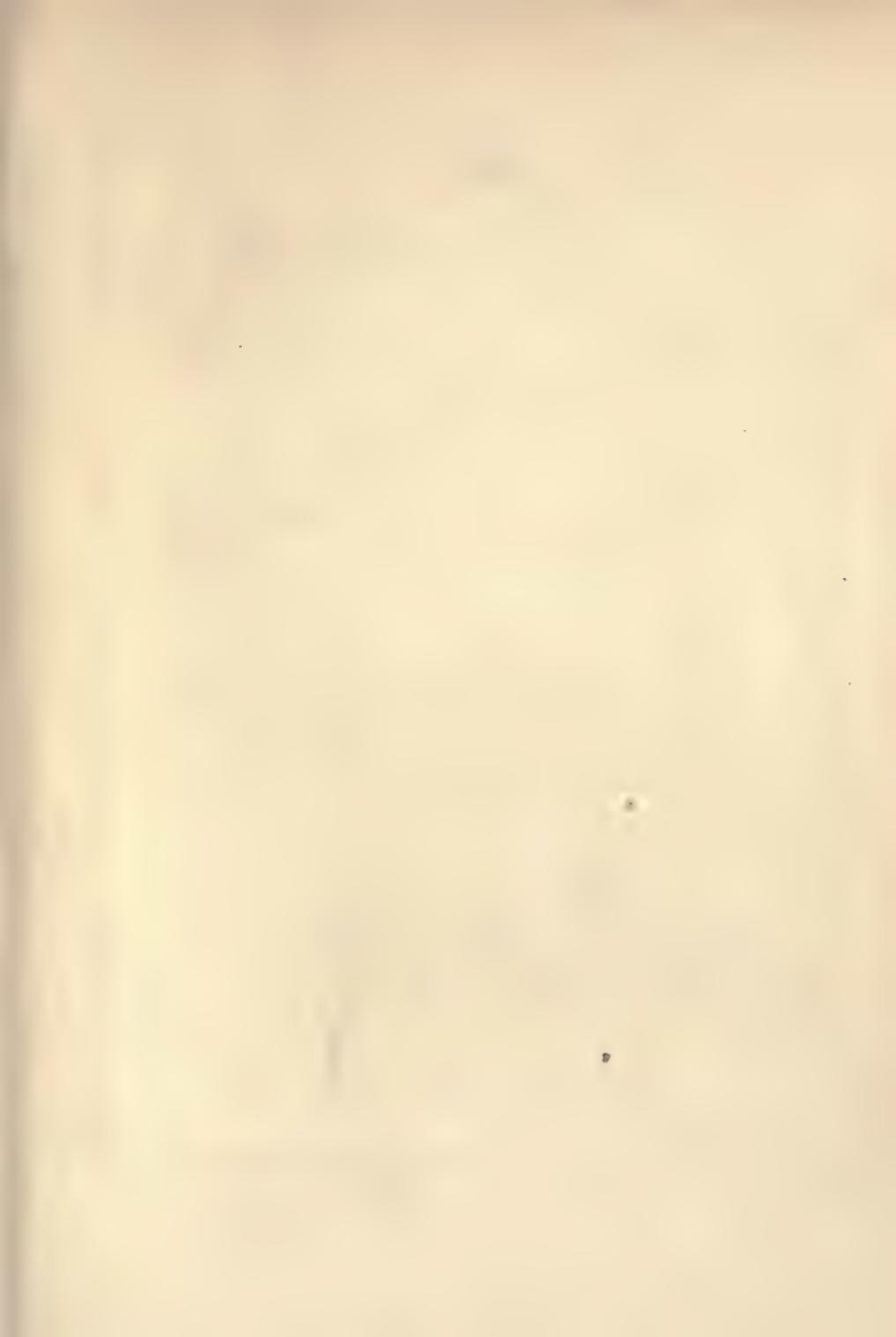
The remaining incidents of Gray's life may be briefly told. In 1753 he lost his mother, but continued to visit Stoke Poges while his aunts survived. He also continued to reside at Cambridge, though repeatedly expressing distaste for his surroundings. We find him staying at Strawberry Hill, with Horace Walpole, and paying short visits to London, on one of which he pointed out to a friend who was with him the burly figure of Dr. Johnson: "Look, the great bear! There goes Ursa Major!" In general he was much the recluse, while a delightful and sympathetic companion to his chosen friends. In 1756 the riotous conduct of some undergraduates drove him out of Peterhouse, and he shifted his quarters to Pembroke. Here he was in a far more con-

genial environment, and that he did not make the change sooner is probably to be ascribed to his native irresolution. In 1757, on the death of Colley Cibber, he was offered the post of poet laureate, but declined it, "though well knowing," as he says, "the bland emollient saponaceous qualities both of sack and silver." For a space of two years, when the British Museum was made accessible to readers, he forsook Cambridge for London, where he occupied rooms in Southampton Row. He made tours through various parts of England and Scotland, a habit not common in that age, and his published *Journal* practically revealed the English lake district to his countrymen. In 1768 he was made Professor of History at Cambridge. No holder of this office had ever been known to deliver oral instruction. Gray appointed a deputy to teach modern languages, and went so far as to draw up a scheme of lectures. But his health was steadily growing worse, and death frustrated his intention of delivering them.

It is probable that he never seriously contemplated marriage. He seems to have been interested in a Miss Speed, but the interest only momentarily threatened to become a warmer feeling. He repeatedly proved himself a sincere and devoted friend; and surely, if physiognomy is any guide, he was the possessor of a generous and lofty character. His poems show a distinct reaction from the artificial style of Pope and his school. He resembles Pope only in

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the care which he bestowed on polishing his lines. Of English bards, judging from *The Progress of Poesy*, he most esteemed Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. His *Elegy* is certainly one of the most perfectly beautiful poems in our language ; and it enjoys the distinction of having obtained on the Continent of Europe a popularity among English poems second only to that enjoyed by the works of Shakespeare and of Byron.





*Goldsmith*

# GOLDSMITH

1728-1774

**I**N the last year of his life Gray received a copy of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, which had just been published ; he asked a friend to read it aloud to him, and, before the friend had got far, interrupted him with the exclamation, "This man is a poet." And a poet Goldsmith was, though incidentally. "Pay no regard to the muses," he wrote to a friend. "I have always found productions in prose more sought after and better paid for." His business was to earn his living, and consequently the volume of his poetry is small—*The Traveller*, *The Deserted Village*, and a few occasional pieces.

Oliver Goldsmith was born at Pallas, a remote farmhouse in county Longford. His father was then curate of the neighbouring parish of Kilkenny West, of which two years later he became rector ; and on his promotion he went to live at Lissoy, in order to be nearer to his cure. Oliver's first schoolmaster was Thomas Byrne, whom he immortalised in *The Deserted Village*. The "village preacher" of the same poem may be taken as an embodiment of the qualities of his father

and of his elder brother, Henry, who was subsequently curate of Kilkenny West, and “passing rich with forty pounds a year.” From the care of Thomas Byrne Oliver passed to a succession of schools, Elphin, Athlone, and Edgworthstown, and from the last entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a “Sizar” or poor scholar. Humiliated by this position, and unfortunate in his tutor, he was in perpetual conflict with authority. Graduating in 1749 he looked about for a profession, presented himself for ordination to the Bishop of Elphin, and was rejected. The story goes that he gave offence by appearing before the examiner in a pair of scarlet breeches, but it is more likely that he failed from neglect of the prescribed studies. Then he thought of the law, and set out for the Temple; but got no farther than Dublin, where he lost all his money at cards. His next choice was medicine, which it was settled he should study at Edinburgh. This time he reached his destination, having looked his last upon Ireland. He worked for a year or so at Edinburgh, but without much application, and then transferred himself to Leyden. But his heart was not in his studies, and he had the love of wandering in his blood. He determined to see the world, and set out from Leyden “with only one clean shirt and no money in his pocket.” His travels lasted about a year. He traversed France, Italy, and Switzerland, and at some foreign University he perhaps took a medical degree. Tradition says that he paid his way

by making music on his flute. This can hardly have been his sole resource, but it is a fair inference from his known skill upon this instrument that he sometimes earned by it a supper and a bed.

His movements, after his return to England in 1756, can be traced more clearly. He had a hard struggle to get his bread. He writes of himself at this period : "I was without friends, recommendations, money, or impudence." First he acted as assistant to a chemist, then, by the help of an old acquaintance, he set up as a physician in Southwark. But he failed to make a living by medicine, and undertook the position of usher in a school at Peckham. The master was a dabbler in literature, and at his house Goldsmith met a bookseller named Griffiths, proprietor of the *Monthly Review*, who offered him work on this journal, a lodgings, and a salary. Goldsmith gladly accepted, and the arrangement lasted some months. It might have lasted longer, had not Griffiths and his wife seen fit to "edit" their lodger's contributions. This led to a second sojourn in the academic groves of Peckham, which he presently quitted in order to take over the post of physician and surgeon to a factory on the coast of Coromandel. The project, however, came to nothing, and from this time Goldsmith devoted himself entirely to literature. With the publication of his *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* the tide turned ; his ability was recognised, several periodicals welcomed him as a contributor,

Newberry the publisher retained him at a salary of £100 a year, and he was able to exchange the squalor of a dirty room in the vicinity of the Old Bailey for decent quarters in Wine Office Court, Fleet Street. Here, in 1761, he was visited by Samuel Johnson, who became his staunch friend and admirer. Here his pen was busy on all sorts of topics; and he wrote so well that before he became famous either as poet, playwright, or novelist, Johnson spoke of him to Boswell as "one of the first men we now have as an author," and insisted on his inclusion as one of the original members of the famous Literary Club.

This was in 1764. Goldsmith was only to live ten years more; but within those years one brilliant success followed another—*The Traveller*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Deserted Village*, *She Stoops to Conquer*. And yet, in spite of these, in spite, too, of his constant industry over various pieces of literary taskwork, he was perpetually in embarrassed circumstances. Many a man would have lived well upon his income, but money never stayed by Goldsmith. Much went in extravagant living, but more in indiscriminate charity. Indebtedness was the spectre at the feast; yet he had much to cheer him—recognition of his greatness as an author, the friendship of such men as Reynolds, Burke, and Johnson, and above all a native buoyancy which no misfortune could permanently quell. There is no trace of depression in *Retaliation*, the witty poem upon which

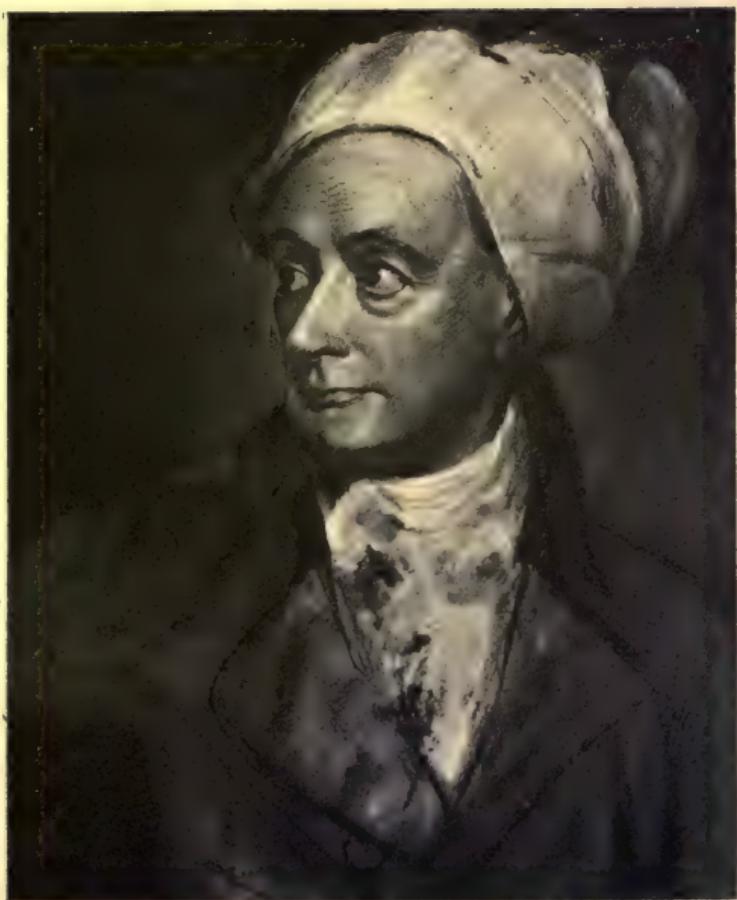
he was engaged when his fatal illness seized him, with its brilliant portraits of Burke and Reynolds, of Garrick and Cumberland. If Goldsmith was a minnow among these conversational tritons, none of that famous circle could excel him as a writer ; and though his talk was weakened by diffuseness, he occasionally got home with a witty remark, and more than once discomfited the mighty Johnson. There is no space to linger over these scenes, nor to do more than touch upon his tender friendship for the lovely Mary Horneck, "the Jessamy bride," for whom a lock of his hair was cut as he lay in his coffin. Of vanity he cannot be acquitted, nor of a jealousy of brother authors ; but his virtues far outweighed his failings : he injured no man, and he helped many. And in return no man was more sincerely mourned than he, not only by his equals, but by the many in humbler stations whom he had befriended. It is on record that at his death they thronged the staircase of his chambers, weeping for their benefactor.

"He left scarcely any style of writing untouched," runs the epitaph, "and touched nothing that he did not adorn." Our concern here is only with his poetry. *The Traveller* was probably inspired by Johnson's verse, but its style is easier. It has some beautiful passages, and many lines that have become current coin. *The Deserted Village* is a far greater poem. There is less of declamation in it, and more of nature, than in *The Traveller*. In those parts of

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it, more especially, which are reminiscent of the poet's youth—for Auburn is surely the Lissoy of his childhood—there is a wonderful and sympathetic tenderness, clothed in language at once dignified and simple. There is a something in *The Deserted Village* which goes straight to the reader's heart and takes it by storm. What more should poem do?





Cowper

# COWPER

1731-1800

THE works of Cowper have their allotted place upon the library shelves, where, it may be, their repose is disturbed but seldom. But there is one room in the house where it is safe to predict that this poet will never be forgotten, and that room is the nursery. It is unthinkable that *The Diverting History of John Gilpin* should ever cease to be a nursery classic. But how the laughter of the children would be hushed if they were told that the maker of their mirth was one of the unhappiest and most afflicted of mankind ! It comes as a shock in later years to find that Gilpin's laureate wrote also *The Castaway*, that splendid poem of despair, through which is heard the cry of a soul that believed itself lost to all eternity.

William Cowper was born at Great Berkhamstead, a pleasant little Hertfordshire town, of which his father was rector. At six years of age he lost his mother, and he was roughly treated at his first school. These troubles, together with indifferent health, saddened his childhood. At Westminster School, where he

went when he was ten, he seems to have been fairly happy, and, as he is known to have excelled at cricket and football, he was probably able to hold his own among his companions. Leaving school at eighteen, he studied law in London, but with no great industry ; his uncle's house was open to him, and his uncle's daughters proved more attractive than the Inns of Court. In this fashion several years passed pleasantly away, Cowper's spirits being equable enough. But when he had been called to the Bar, and had taken chambers in the Temple, he was attacked by extreme depression, and was obliged to leave town. A sojourn at Southampton, however, proved an excellent medicine. He had fallen deeply in love with his cousin, Theodora, and she with him ; but her father would not hear of their marriage, and the lovers parted. The parting was final, and seems to have been felt even more keenly by Theodora Cowper than by her cousin. She lived unmarried, and survived him, cherishing the verses which he had written to her in the years of their happy intimacy.

In 1759 Cowper was made a Commissioner in Bankruptcy. But the office was not lucrative, and he hoped for better-paid employment. In 1763 his cousin, Major Cowper, undertook to obtain for him the post of "Clerk to the Journals of the House of Lords." The position, however, was a coveted one, and Cowper was informed that he must undergo an examination at the bar of the House, to prove his

competency to hold it. The prospect of this public scrutiny quite upset his balance. On the day before the examination he attempted suicide. A fit of violent madness ensued, which took on a religious colouring. After five months he regained sanity, but felt himself unequal to any public appointment, and resigned even his commissionership. He longed for retirement, and sought it at Huntingdon. Here, in a fortunate hour, he became acquainted with the Unwins. They invited him to share their home, and treated him with the utmost kindness. Cowper had become exceedingly devout, and much of his time was passed in religious exercises. Mr. Unwin died in 1767, but Cowper's home was still with Mrs. Unwin and her son. It is known that he after a time wished to marry her, but the uncertainty of his mental health proved a barrier. It is creditable to both that this proposition did not impair their friendship. A more questionable influence upon Cowper's life was that of John Newton, an evangelical clergyman who had been commander of a slave ship. Newton was curate of Olney, and persuaded Mrs. Unwin and Cowper to migrate thither. Newton's Christianity was of a narrow type, and can scarcely have escaped fostering Cowper's habit of morbid introspection. Cowper laboured, also, amongst the poor, and may have worked too hard. At any rate he had a fresh attack of insanity in 1773, by which his intellect was clouded for over a year. Newton left Olney soon after his

recovery. Cowper sought distraction in composition, and it was now that his first considerable poems were written. These included *Table-Talk*, *Truth*, *Expostulation*, *Conversation*, and others, and made up a volume published in 1782. Now, too, he was cheered by the friendship of a lively widow, Lady Austen, who became his neighbour. It was she who told him the story of John Gilpin ; it was she who suggested the subject of *The Task*. " You can write upon any subject," she said, " write upon this sofa." Unhappily, Lady Austen was exacting, and a coolness grew between them. Perhaps, though Brentford could hold two kings, Olney could not hold two muses. *The Task*, together with *John Gilpin*, was published in 1785, and was immediately and widely popular.

The renewal of his friendship with his cousin Lady Hesketh, Theodora's sister, is the next outstanding event in Cowper's life. She visited him at Olney, and at her suggestion a removal was effected to the neighbouring village of Weston, where the poet had appreciative friends in the Throckmortons, a Roman Catholic family. He now found congenial occupation in translating Homer ; but a fresh and unlooked-for trouble occurred—the death of Mrs. Unwin's son, to whom he was deeply attached. This was followed by another period of insanity, in the course of which he again attempted suicide. On his recovery he persevered with Homer, and his version of the *Iliad*

appeared in 1791. The rest of his life is marked by continuous and increasing sadness. Mrs. Unwin was stricken by paralysis, and her mind gradually weakened. Cowper tended her with the utmost devotion, but his own melancholia was heavy upon him. A pension from Government of £300 saved him from financial cares, and in 1795 they left Weston for Mundesley, in Norfolk, where they sojourned for a few weeks, and then settled at East Dereham. There, within the year, Mrs. Unwin died; and there also, after four years of deepening gloom, the poet also took his farewell of life.

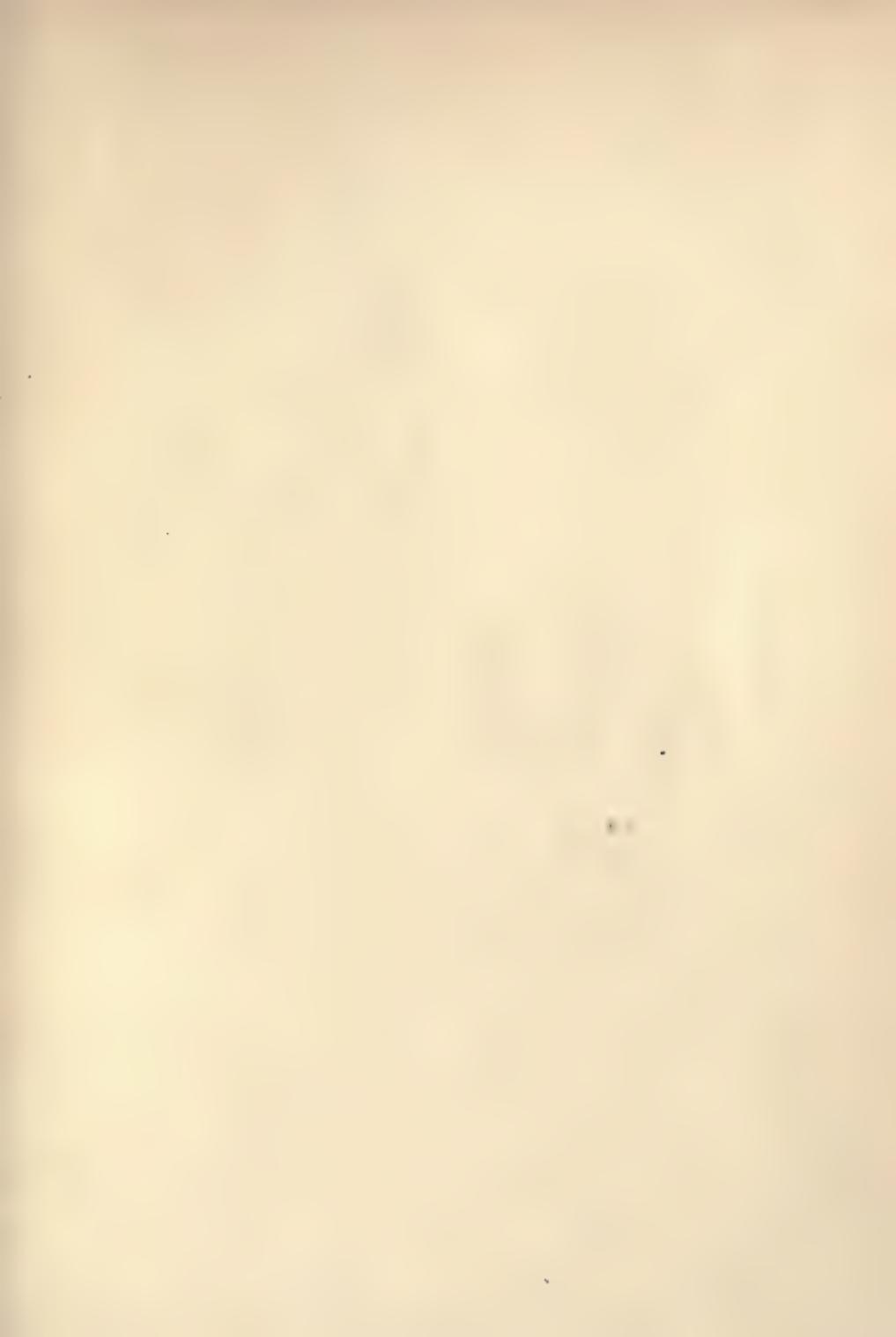
Cowper's earlier and later manner are sufficiently indicated by the contents of the volumes of 1782 and 1785. In the first he is moralist, satirist, and—notably in *Conversation*—humourist. He is still bound by the fetters of the heroic couplet, so dear to the eighteenth century, though feeling that Pope had established a bad tradition, had, in Cowper's own words,

“ Made poetry a mere mechanic art,  
And every warbler has his tune by heart.”

It was Lady Austen who encouraged him to shake off these trammels, and to take Milton's blank verse as his model. In *The Task* Cowper writes like a man set free; he expatiates with no sign of weariness over such topics as religion, liberty, domesticity, and the joys of rural life; and recaptures the pure delight

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which the older poets felt in the contemplation of the natural world. And yet, when all is said, he is perhaps at his best in his shorter poems; most impressive in the noblest of his many hymns, that beginning "God moves in a mysterious way," most stirring in *Boadicea*, most human in *Alexander Selkirk*, and above all most pathetic in the lines *To Mary Unwin* and in those *On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture*.





*Blake.*

# BLAKE

1757-1827

BLAKE cannot be ranked among the *diī majores* of English poetry, if bulk only is to count. For the volume of his verse, excluding the so-called "Prophetical Books," is small, and even in that small amount there is much that is negligible. Yet there remains, after due deductions, a sheaf of poems large enough to attest the originality and starry genius of their author.

William Blake was born in London, the son of a hosier, and had a scanty education. He is known to have attended a drawing-school in the Strand, and at the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to an engraver named Basire. His master used to send him to make drawings of the interiors of London churches, and with this occupation the boy was well content. After his seven years' apprenticeship he studied for a time at the Royal Academy School, and then started to earn a living by engraving for the booksellers.

Blake was a visionary of the visionaries, and the effect is seen in his work as artist and as poet. His designs, notably the "Inventions for the Book of

Job" and the illustrations to Blair's *Grave*, convey ideas of vastness, and often of horror, to a remarkable degree. He would sit of an evening and sketch the portraits of men long dead, looking up now and again from his work as though the sitter were actually before him. A remarkable series of "spiritual portraits" survives to attest this strange gift of his. When questioned as to its nature, he would say, "Work up imagination to the state of vision, and the thing is done." Such an attitude of mind is abnormal, and his sanity has been questioned. There are certainly passages in his poems which are quite unintelligible, and the "Prophetic Books" of his later life are usually considered hopeless, though no doubt they had a meaning for their writer. Yet for the practical purposes of life he was perfectly sane, constantly toiling at his art, and expressing surprise that anyone should want a holiday.

In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher, a daughter of the people. She was without education, but teachable, and proved a most devoted wife. Two lines out of Blake's *Samson* may be applied to this pair—

" He seemed a mountain, his brow among the clouds ;  
She seemed a silver stream, his feet embracing."

The marriage was a most happy one. Blake's *Poetical Sketches* now appeared, but made no stir, though they include three lyrics, "How sweet I roamed from field to field," "My silks and fine

array," and "To the Muses," which seem conveyed from some Elizabethan fairyland. For the famous *Songs of Innocence* no publisher was forthcoming; by a process of Blake's invention this husband and wife produced them with their own hands. Every line of the *Songs of Innocence* and, later, of the *Songs of Experience*, was engraved.

There are few further incidents in Blake's life to record. It was devoted to constant labour, indifferently recompensed. Some of the leading artists of the time—Flaxman, Stothard, and Fuseli—were his friends. London was his lifelong home, with only one considerable break, when he removed to Felpham, on the Sussex coast. This was at the suggestion of Hayley, a country gentleman, who was also a rhymer. He was employed in writing the life of Cowper, and engaged Blake to engrave the illustrations for it. The stay at Felpham covered three years. Blake liked the locality, but chafed under Hayley's well-meaning but ill-informed criticisms. Back in London, he continued his usual routine. He wrote more poetry, but perhaps nothing quite so good as *The Tiger*, that amazing lyric which grips the imagination harder the oftener it is read. He wrote also the "Prophetic Books," which a few persons profess to understand. But his best energies were engrossed in his work as a designer and engraver. When death came to him at threescore years and ten, he met it with that serene temper which might

have been predicted of one who said: "I cannot think of death as more than going out of one room into another." His wife survived him; and he left her a sufficient capital in his works to supply her needs.

When we contrast what he was able to achieve in the arts he followed, the verdict is that he was greater as a designer than as a poet. But in each of them he worked with single-minded devotion. It was one of his mystically worded ambitions

"to build Jerusalem  
On England's green and pleasant land";

and all who have a dash of mysticism in their composition will perceive, if they study his works, that he never swerved from that intention.





*Burns*

# BURNS

1759-1796

ROBERT BURNS first saw the light in a two-roomed clay-built cottage, in the parish of Alloway, some two miles from the town of Ayr. His father, William Burness, (so he spelt his name), was then an overseer in the service of a laird of that country; but a few years later, in hopes of mending his fortunes, he rented the neighbouring farm of Mount Oliphant. The soil was poor, and the tenant's laborious life was embittered by disputes with an overbearing factor, upon whose methods light is thrown in Robert's poem, *The Twa Dogs*. Burness and his neighbours secured the services of a tutor for the education of their sons, who was boarded in their houses by turns, and received a small payment quarterly. The boys were well grounded in the English language, and Robert acquired some knowledge of French. Their chief textbooks were the Bible, a *Collection of Prose and Verse*, consisting of excerpts from English classics, and the *Works of Allan Ramsay*, the Scots poet. Ramsay and Fergusson, a later bard, are to be looked upon as

Burns' poetical progenitors—so far as he may be considered to have had any.

The Scotch have always been honourably known for their zeal for education, and it is not surprising to learn that William Burness could only get his sons educated at the cost of much self-sacrificing toil. Even so he could hardly make both ends meet ; and Robert, at the age of fifteen, became his father's chief helper, and was obliged to take upon him the work of a full-grown man. It is certain that the hard and unceasing labour of the Mount Oliphant days permanently injured his constitution.

Happily the yoke was made lighter after a time. In 1777 William Burness left Mount Oliphant for Lochlie, a farm in the neighbouring parish of Tarbolton, which he held on easier terms. Robert had time to take lessons in dancing and mensuration, and to share in the social diversions of the countryside. Presently he went to reside at Irvine, to learn flax-dressing, and was there much in the company of a sailor, one Richard Brown, from whom he got little good. On his return he and his brother Gilbert rented the farm of Mossiel, in Mauchline parish, where so many of his poems were to be written. Three months later William Burness died of consumption, his end hastened by a dispute with his landlord, in which he came out second-best.

The brothers worked hard at Mossiel, but did not exactly prosper. It is said that Gilbert was too much

of a theorist, and Robert's mind was full of other things than farming. A dispute was raging between the Auld and New Lights, in which two friends of Robert, Gavin Hamilton, his landlord, and Aiken, a lawyer, were engaged. Burns, who had already been publicly rebuked by the Kirk-Session for the irregularity of his life, sided with his friends, and assailed the Auld Lights in the *Twa Herds*, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, and other verses. The *Prayer* is perhaps the most savage personal onslaught in modern literature. *Holy Willie* was William Fisher, an elder of the Kirk, who afterwards was convicted of embezzling Church funds, and died in a ditch, into which he had fallen when he was drunk. But Burns wrote pleasanter things than these at Mossgiel, such as the poems to the Mouse and the Daisy, both composed as he followed the plough, the *Epistle to Davie*, and the numerous other verses which make up his first volume, that published at Kilmarnock in the July of 1786. Meanwhile he had fallen in love with Jean Armour, promised her marriage, and been repudiated with contumely by her father. Sick at heart, he made up his mind to emigrate to Jamaica, where he was offered employment. The Kilmarnock volume was to pay his passage. At this parting of the ways occurred the incident of "Highland Mary," which, so variously explained by his biographers, still remains mysterious. She was Mary Campbell, and it was to her, years after, that Burns wrote the beautiful lines, *To Mary in*

*Heaven.* It used to be held that they plighted their troth, and that she parted from Burns to go to her friends at Greenock, to make preparations for the wedding. There, at any rate, she died ; and Burns, unusually reticent in this case, never enlightened his friends as to their real relations. It remains uncertain whether he intended to make her his wife—in view of his dispute with the Armour family such a course would have been natural enough—or whether she was only one of the many sweethearts to whom he was temporarily devoted.

The Kilmarnock volume appeared, and was a triumphant success. A second edition was demanded, but the printer declined to issue one unless he was paid the price of the paper (£27) in advance. Burns could not pay it, and departure for Jamaica seemed imminent. He wrote a moving farewell to Scotland—*The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast*—but still lingered. In Edinburgh publishers might be more amenable. Thither, at last, he set out, reaching the capital on the 28th of November, 1786.

In Edinburgh everybody who was anybody made much of Burns. He bore himself with dignity, having a just appreciation both of his own genius and of what was due to the social standing of his entertainers. Unhappily there were less desirable circles clamouring for his company, in which “the Bard” was pleased to unbend, and to go to injudicious lengths in conviviality. A meteor he was, and he soon

saw that there was no permanent place for him among the fixed stars of Edinburgh society. With native shrewdness he never lost sight of his future, and had his eye on a farm in Dumfriesshire and a post in the Excise. He came to terms with Creech, the publisher, and in May left Edinburgh for a tour in the south of Scotland, in the course of which he crossed the Border. Then he returned to Mauchline, and again met Jean Armour. Two expeditions to the north of Scotland followed, and in November he was again in Edinburgh. Here he met Mrs. M'Lehose, the "Clarinda" of his poems, with whom he professed himself much in love. They might have married, had there not been a husband in the West Indies. An opportune payment by Creech of the remaining money due to the poet made further lingering superfluous. Burns received about £450 for the Edinburgh edition, £200 of which he handed to his brother Gilbert, who was still at Mossiel. Tired, no doubt, of vacillation, he rented his new farm of Ellisland, and married Jean Armour (March 24th, 1788). She had remained faithful to him through good and ill report, and so remained to the end. At Whitsuntide he entered on possession of Ellisland, worked hard, and was happy. Next year, to add to his income, he got his position in the Excise confirmed. This meant the supervision of ten parishes, and that some two hundred miles a week must be traversed on horseback. Yet he found time to contribute a batch of songs each fortnight to "The Scots

Museum"; and *Tam O'Shanter* was written in one day. But the farm and the Excise duties proved too much for him. He got rid of Ellisland in November, 1791, on accepting an Excise division, and migrated to Dumfries.

This is the last and saddest stage of his career. A little town like Dumfries, with its temptations to waste the hours over a bottle, was the very worst place for Burns. His deterioration was patent. His health was failing, and at thirty-five he complains of feeling the approach of old age. His temper, too, betrayed him into certain errors which lost him his popularity. He sympathised too deeply, some thought, with the French Convention; but be it remembered that when England was threatened he expressed his patriotic feelings in no uncertain tones, a song upon the possibility of an invasion being one of the last of his poetic utterances. He died of rheumatic fever, after a protracted illness, at the age of thirty-seven.

The tragedy of his life, cut short in its prime, needs no emphasising. Yet Burns had done his work—and what a great work! Several of his best poems have been incidentally mentioned, but there is no space for a complete list of his masterpieces. There is hardly an aspect of the life of his time and country which he did not reproduce. The satirist of *The Kirk Alarm* wrote also *The Cotter's Saturday Night*; Burns waged war with hypocrisy, but not with religion. His practice was faulty, but of that none was more con-

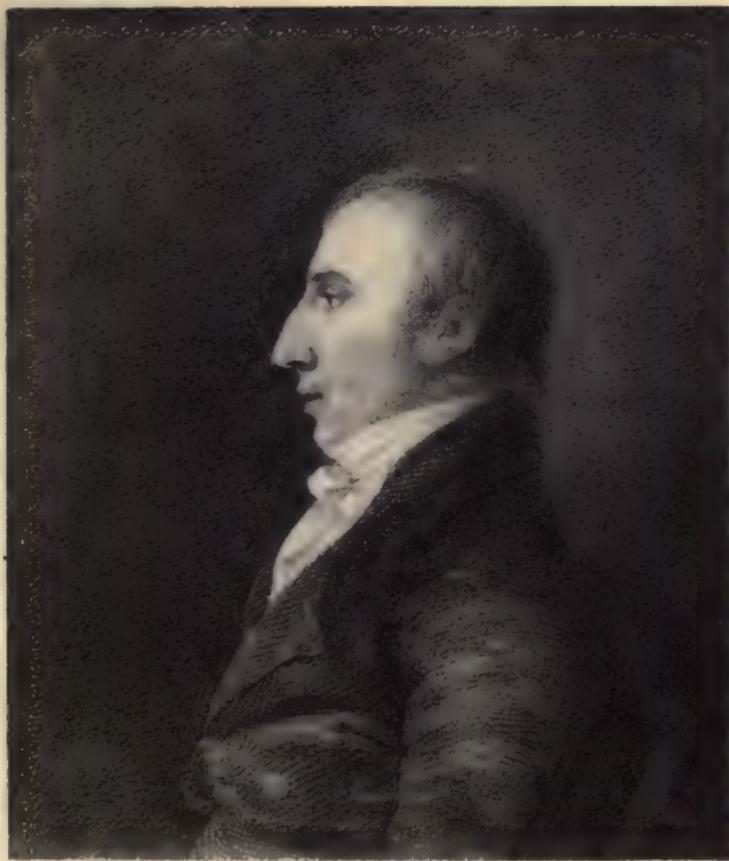
scious than himself. Read *A Bard's Epitaph*, if you wish to be convinced. But beside all this he is in the very first flight of the song-writers of all nations. "Is there for honest poverty," "Of all the airts the wind can blaw," "O, wert thou in the cauld blast," and many more—these are indeed noble numbers, which will surely continue to sing themselves down the ages, so long as lofty and tender thoughts, clad in sweetest melody, are prized.

# WORDSWORTH

1770-1850

UNEVENTFUL as at first sight Wordsworth's life appears, some acquaintance with it is yet essential to a proper appreciation of his poetry, for the one is the direct outcome of the other. The story of his early years may be studied in his posthumous poem, *The Prelude*, a valuable fragment of autobiography, in which he has traced the inner tendencies and external influences which made him what he became.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, in Cumberland. He seems to have been a turbulent child, and on the death of his mother his father, who was legal agent to Sir James Lowther, afterwards Earl of Lonsdale, sent him to school at Hawkshead, a village on the shore of Esthwaite Lake. Here he boarded in the cottage of a villager, and out of school hours enjoyed complete liberty, which he devoted to long rambles about the countryside and close observation of the varying moods of nature. He rode long distances, when he could borrow a nag, and took great delight in skating. If he differed



*Wordsworth*



from his fellows, it was chiefly by an early addiction to solitary musing. In 1783 he lost his father. At eighteen he went up to Cambridge, being entered at St. John's College, but, like Gray before him, did not care much for the studies of the place. In his first long vacation he revisited Hawkshead, and after a night spent in dancing, left his host's house as the sun was rising. As he stood watching it, he felt himself, in his own words, "a dedicated spirit." The impression was permanent, though years were to elapse before he realised the exact nature of his mission.

He took his degree without honours; and, not finding himself inclined for any particular profession, resolved to see the world. At Cambridge he had mastered French, as well as Italian and Spanish, so that he might hope to profit by travel. After staying some months in London he left England in the autumn of 1791, witnessed and shared the enthusiasm of the French republicans, listened in Paris to the debates of the Jacobin Club, and passed some time at Blois, where he found a congenial friend in a French officer of noble birth and democratic opinions. Wordsworth deplored the breaking out of war between England and the French Republic, and at first felt with the latter. The excesses of the Revolution subsequently disenchanted him, as they did many others; he sympathised with the Girondins, and heard of Robespierre's fall with satisfaction.

Wordsworth's first volume, the *Descriptive Sketches*, appeared in 1793, after his return from the Continent. It is reminiscent of the school of Pope, both in metre and in manner. He had not yet found himself as a poet, and as a man his future was uncertain. He had embraced the dismal philosophy of William Godwin, and was proportionately depressed. At this crisis a friend died and left him £900; and another friend put an empty farmhouse—Racedown, in Dorsetshire—at his disposal. Here he settled with his sister Dorothy, a talented woman and a devoted sister; and, thanks to her society and to close communion with nature, shook off the incubus of Godwin's theories. In 1797 the brother and sister moved to Allfoxden House, situated at the foot of the Quantock Hills and in view of the Bristol Channel, mainly to be near Coleridge, who was settled at Nether Stowey. The two poets became great friends, and next year jointly published the *Lyrical Ballads*, among which were included, along with much that is of inferior merit, *The Ancient Mariner* and *Tintern Abbey*, two poems in which the respective authors are seen at their best. The publication of this volume is justly regarded as a landmark in the history of English literature. Its avowed purpose was to challenge "the gaudiness and inane phraseology" of what currently passed muster as poetic diction. Wordsworth was not the first rebel

against this convention, but he was the first to impeach it formally.

Shortly after the appearance of the *Lyrical Ballads* the Wordsworths went to Germany, in order to study the German language, and spent a dull winter at Goslar. Their own country was calling them: they returned to the English lake district, where, with but few intervals, the remainder of their lives was to be passed. Dove Cottage, a tiny dwelling at Grasmere, was their first home. Lord Lonsdale had refused to recognise the considerable monetary claim upon him which Wordsworth's father had left to his children as their principal asset; but on his death in 1802 the claim was allowed. Wordsworth was consequently better off, and felt in a position to marry. The bride whom he brought to Dove Cottage was Mary Hutchinson, who had long been his and his sister's friend. The marriage was a very happy one, though shadowed by the loss of two children. The death of his favourite brother, a sailor, whose character is thought to have suggested *The Happy Warrior*, was also a great grief to Wordsworth. He was fortunate in his friends, among whom he numbered Scott, Sir George Beaumont, the painter, and the second Lord Lonsdale. Coleridge also was settled at Keswick, and was a valued neighbour. In 1807 appeared a second volume of *Ballads*, Coleridge not contributing, which included the *Ode to Duty* and the great *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, considered by many

to be Wordsworth's finest poem. Dove Cottage could not hold an increasing family, and the Wordsworths eventually occupied Rydal Mount, which was the poet's home for the last thirty-seven years of his life. In 1814, by Lord Lonsdale's influence, he was made distributor of stamps for the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, with a stipend of £400 a year. The post was not a sinecure, and Wordsworth performed its duties with exactness. *The Excursion*, to which he had devoted many years, was now published. "This will never do," began Jeffery's review in *The Edinburgh*; but Keats thought it a masterpiece, and put its author beside Milton. *The River Daddon Sonnets* appeared in 1820. The political views of poets are only of secondary interest; but it may be mentioned that Wordsworth was opposed to Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill. So far had he travelled from his original opinions! Recognition of his poetical merits had now become general. Universities conferred honorary degrees upon him. On his resignation of his appointment in 1842 he received a pension of £300 in place of it, and on Southey's death he was made poet laureate. His last years were saddened by the loss of many friends, but above all by the death of his idolised daughter, Dora Quillinan, in 1847. It was a shock from which he was too old to recover wholly.

It cannot be denied that Wordsworth's theories as to the subjects and diction proper to poetry some-

times led him astray. He was so anxious to be simple and natural that he at times descended to puerility. But his lapses are a hundred times outweighed by the consummate excellence, both of thought and expression, of such poems as "I wandered lonely as a cloud," and "Three years she grew in sun and shower." Again, he cannot be acquitted of occasional dullness and diffuseness. But he is, with these reservations, a very great poet. He called and still calls mankind from the worship of riches and convention to those simple pleasures which money cannot buy, to the joys which spring from a love of nature and the exercise of the natural human affections, to the things which are so common that they are apt to be neglected. He is also a prophet of that divine power

" Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man."

He has given a sense of calm and reconciliation to the most diverse temperaments. And those who walk through life self-reverent yet self-distrustful, who listen for the voice of God not in churches only, but in the fair world about them, and find their hearts best satisfied by simple duties and affections, these are true Wordsworthians, even if they have never read a line of Wordsworth's poetry.

# SCOTT

1771-1832

**W**ALTER SCOTT was born in Edinburgh. His father was a Writer to the Signet, one of the Scotts of Harden and "kinsman to the bold Buccleugh." At an early age he had his first sight of the Border country, which he was to make so famous, being sent to his grandfather's house of Sandy Knowe, near Kelso, for health's sake. A fever had left one of his legs powerless, and though he regained the use of it, and was able to walk his twenty or thirty miles with ease, he was permanently lamed. He could remember lying on the floor at Sandy Knowe, listening to his grandmother's Border legends, and could recall the rugged hillside and the ruined tower of Smailholm,

"A barren scene, and wild,  
Where naked cliffs were rudely piled ;  
But ever and anon between  
Lay velvet tufts of loveliest green ;  
And well the lonely infant knew  
Recesses where the wall-flower grew,  
And honey-suckle loved to crawl  
Up the low crag and ruin'd wall."\*

\* Introduction to *Marmion*, Canto III.



Scott



In 1778 he returned to Edinburgh, sufficiently recovered to attend the High School. He was not notably industrious over his lessons, but delighted in *The Faery Queen* and Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. He was a thoroughly manly boy, and "good at need" with his fists. In 1786, after some study at the University, he was apprenticed to his father, but presently determined to be an advocate, and was called to the Scots bar in 1792. He became deeply attached to a young lady of great charm, who finally rejected him, but with characteristic good sense he did not allow the disappointment to spoil his life or interfere for long with his growing work and his many interests. He was now making his "raids," as he called them, into the Border country and the Highlands, everywhere making friends with high and low, and acquiring vast stores of legend and fable; and was translating ballads from the German, and contributing to the *Tales of Wonder* of "Monk" Lewis. In 1797 he married Miss Charlotte Charpentier, the daughter of a French refugee, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight. Two years later he was appointed Sheriff of Selkirkshire, with an income of £300. The work was light, but in order to be near it he took Ashestiel, a house on the Tweed, in the very heart of the country which he most loved. Besides his legal work he undertook to edit Dryden, compiled *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and was meditating a long poem. He habitually rose

early, and got through a large amount of work before breakfast-time.

A friend read to him a part of Coleridge's *Christabel*. Scott took a liking to the metre; and when *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* appeared in 1805, it was found to be written in the metre of *Christabel*. The choice was a wise one, for the short lines, with their possibilities of structural variation, are well suited to narrative. The *Lay* was immensely popular, and *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, its successors, won equal favour. Meanwhile Scott had obtained a second legal appointment, and had become a partner in the publishing firm of the Ballantynes. Everything seemed to prosper with him: he bought Abbotsford, and added field to field. He continued to write poetry—*Rokeby* and *The Bridal of Triermain*—but these works are inferior to the earlier triad. The star of Byron had arisen, and Scott began to feel that his vein of poetry was worked out. He was now to discover a far richer one. Years before he had begun a story, *Waverley*, but laid it aside. Chance brought the manuscript to his notice, and he completed it. In 1814 *Waverley* was published, and the great series of romances begun. For the next ten years he poured forth one masterpiece after another. The labour was enormous, yet he never seemed to lack leisure. It was said that the busiest writer of the day appeared to have nothing to do but to entertain his friends. He only admitted the authorship of

the novels five years before his death, but it was soon recognised as indisputably his. These were the great days of Abbotsford, when among his children, friends, retainers, and dogs, Scott lived a life resembling that of one of his own chieftains. In 1718 he accepted a baronetcy. About the same time he had an illness so prolonged and serious that he believed himself dying, and called for his children to bid them good-bye, but happily recovered. The poems of this period are *The Field of Waterloo* and *Harold the Dauntless*. He took a leading part in the reception of George IV. at Edinburgh, in 1822.

But the days of his prosperity were nearing a close. Scott's expenditure was lavish, and as a man of business he was probably imprudent. The failure of the publishing houses of Constable and Ballantyne, with both of which he was connected, brought him to the verge of ruin. This was in 1826. The creditors behaved well, and Scott vowed they should be paid in full. In the midst of this calamity came the death of his wife. Yet he set to work at once. *The Life of Napoleon*, *Tales of a Grandfather*, and half a dozen more novels attest his heroic and almost superhuman industry. So well did he succeed that half of his liabilities were cleared off in his lifetime, and the remainder after his death, these chiefly by the sale of his copyrights and by the proceeds of Lockhart's *Life*.

But the strain was too great. In 1830 he had a

paralytic stroke. Still he worked on. His doctors ordered him abroad, and Government put a ship of war at his disposal. He visited Naples and Rome, and seemed benefited. But on his way home he had a second stroke. At his earnest prayer the journey was continued, and he reached his loved Abbotsford ; but only to die.

The figure of "Sir Walter" is one of the noblest and most lovable in all literature. He was in every way a great man. Though a Tory of the Tories, he counted Whigs among his intimate friends. Byron's ridicule of his poetry in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* did not prevent him from being Byron's friend and admirer ; Jeffrey's strictures did not alienate his regard. By the immediate circle of his family, and by such dependents as Tom Purdie and Laidlaw, he was idolised. The reader of his works, whether prose or verse, soon grows to love their author, so permeated are they by Scott's great-hearted and generous nature. There arises in him that feeling which Tennyson has voiced so finely :—

" O great and gallant Scott,  
True gentleman, heart, blood, and bone,  
I would it had been my lot  
To have seen thee, and heard thee, and known."

The *Lay* and its companions have been described as " novels in rhyme," but they may be that and yet be

good poetry too. The best of them contain much that is genuine poetry, including many songs of great beauty. They delighted thousands of Scott's contemporaries; and for those who have an ear for music the "Harp of the North," after close on a hundred years, has not lost its power to charm.

# COLERIDGE

1772-1834

**S**INCE with Coleridge the poetic impulse practically ended with his thirtieth year, of several available portraits that one has been chosen which represents him in early manhood, before the poet was merged in the metaphysician.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the youngest child of the Reverend John Coleridge, vicar and schoolmaster of Ottery St. Mary, in Devonshire. On the death of his father, whose memory he loved and revered, he was entered at Christ's Hospital, where he made a lifelong friendship with Charles Lamb. He was no ordinary schoolboy, as the pages of "Elia" attest. We see him "unfolding the mysteries of Plotinus, or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar—while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the *inspired charity boy!*" This was in the cloisters out of school-hours. We hear of him, in another mood, swimming the New River in his clothes, and not changing them afterwards. By such freaks as this, and by poor and insufficient food, the seeds of ill-health were sown.



Coleridge



Coleridge was hardly less erratic at Cambridge. In his first year he won the gold medal for a Greek Ode; at the end of his second he fled from the University, whether debt or a disappointment in love were the cause, and enlisted in the 15th Dragoons. He served four months, betrayed himself by a Latin quotation, was bought out by his friends and sent back to Cambridge. In politics he was an advanced Liberal, though avowing himself no Jacobin, and at first, like Wordsworth, an enthusiastic admirer of the French Revolution. He probably grew tired of Cambridge, which he left in 1794 without taking a degree. He had met Southey during a visit to Oxford, and now joined him at Bristol. Here, with a few other sympathetic spirits, the two friends invented the name and idea of Pantisocracy. They were to found a colony on the Susquehanna River, hold their goods in common, provide for their needs by working two hours a day, and spend the remaining hours in study and discussion. Meanwhile Coleridge delivered a course of fiery political harangues, and became engaged to Sara Fricker, whose sister Edith was already engaged to Southey. He married her on the 4th of October, 1795, and settled in a tiny cottage at Clevedon. Pantisocracy was shelved.

In the spring of the next year he determined to start a weekly newspaper, and travelled far and wide in quest of subscribers, occupying Unitarian pulpits in the towns he visited. He obtained sufficient

support and produced *The Watchman*, which, however, collapsed after its tenth number. The publication, in 1797, of his *Poems on Various Subjects* was followed by a removal from Clevedon to Nether Stowey. Here Coleridge composed nearly all his best poems. Here he met Wordsworth, and joined him in that collaboration of which the *Lyrical Ballads* was the outcome. To this volume Coleridge contributed the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Nightingale*. He now very nearly accepted a permanent post as Unitarian minister at Shrewsbury, but two friends, the brothers Wedgwood, who divined his genius, offered to settle an annuity of £150 upon him if he would devote himself to poetry and philosophy. Hazlitt, who was with him when the proposal came, says that "he seemed to make up his mind to close with it in the act of tying on one of his shoes." It should be added that Coleridge gradually separated himself from Unitarian opinion, and became a supporter of orthodox Christianity. After seeing *Lyrical Ballads* through the press he set out for the Continent, to acquire the German language and study Kant's philosophy.

At Ratzeburg and Göttingen he devoted a year to these objects, with a concentration as wholly laudable as it was, with him, unusual. There are pleasant glimpses of him at Göttingen, where his amiability and remarkable conversational gifts made him acceptable to all. In 1799 he returned to England, and

after a visit to Nether Stowey took rooms in London. He now translated Schiller's *Wallenstein*, in such a manner as to make it an English classic. Now, too, began his connection with *The Morning Post*, which might have proved extremely lucrative, could he have put up with the yoke of regularity. So varied were his gifts that this poet and dreamer was also an admirable journalist. But he hated regularity, and he had also a decided preference for the country. He left London in 1800, and settled with his family at Greta Hall, a large house in the outskirts of Keswick, commanding a magnificent view of Derwentwater, which was presently to be the home of Southeby also.

At Greta Hall his earliest employment was the composition of the second part of *Christabel*, but the poem, which he himself esteemed his best, was never to be finished. A sad change was stealing over Coleridge, of which none was more deeply and despairingly conscious than himself. *Dejection*, that ode as moving as it is beautiful, which he wrote at Keswick in 1802, is practically his farewell to poetry. He had lost his dearest possession, his "shaping spirit of imagination."

The cause is not far to seek. At Keswick his health rapidly deteriorated. He suffered much pain, of a neuralgic or rheumatic kind, and in a fatal moment had recourse to opium. The relief was immediate, but a habit was formed which sapped his resolution and marred his intellect on its creative side. As may be supposed, also, it ruined his domestic

happiness. This is the tragedy of his life. He who had written

“To be beloved is all I need,  
And whom I love I love indeed,”

found himself estranged by his slavery to opium from his nearest and dearest. His friends did what they could for him, the Wordsworths in particular, who insisted on lending him money when his physician advised travel. He visited Malta and Italy, but returned to London ill and miserable. The next twelve years were passed with various friends, chiefly in or near London. Amid the shadows of this period it is pleasant to record that his lectures on Shakespeare put him in the first rank of Shakesperian critics, and that by the good offices of Byron his drama, *Remorse*, written many years previously, was successfully produced at Drury Lane. But he was continually under the tyranny of opium. At last, in 1816, he consented to put himself under the care of a physician, Mr. Gillman, of Highgate. Mr. Gillman and his wife tended him with devotion, and with them he made his home for the rest of his life. The opium habit, though never cured, was greatly mitigated, and Coleridge was comparatively at peace. He collected his poems, wrote *Aids to Reflection*, and from his philosophical discourse became an oracle to the younger generation of thoughtful men. He wrote also the *Biographia Literaria*, perhaps the ablest work on literary criticism in the language, in which is

to be found the fullest examination of Wordsworth's poetical theories, and also of that poet's lapses therefrom both in subject and in diction. The close of the life of Coleridge was happier than could have been hoped, in view of the central period of eclipse. But it was a maimed life, when all is said.

The two most striking features of his poetry are its spontaneity and its melody ; and if it be asked in which of his poems these qualities are exemplified in the highest degree, the answer is, In *Kubla Khan*, in *Christabel*, in *Dejection*, in *Youth and Age*, above all in *The Ancient Mariner*.

# BYRON

1788-1824

**T**HERE is in the career of Lord Byron much that puts him on the level of the ordinary ne'er-do-well of his time and station ; but it has two great features which effectually raised him from the ruck—his poetry and his love of freedom. The best of his poetry, and his sacrifices for Greek independence, these are the really significant things about him, the things to be remembered. In these spheres of activity his higher nature triumphed.

George Gordon Noel Byron was born in London, at a house in Holles Street. From his parents he inherited a passionate and highly sensitive temperament, and his up-bringing was not calculated to teach him self-control. He lost his father, a man of indifferent reputation, when he was three ; and his mother alternately petted and treated him with harshness. He was lame from birth, and this misfortune constantly preyed upon his spirits. His early years were passed at Aberdeen, where he attended the Grammar School and was observed to have an excellent memory. Mrs. Byron was ex-



*Byron*



tremely poor ; but in 1794 her son became unexpectedly heir to a peerage, to which he succeeded four years later. Upon this the trustees made her an allowance of £300 a year, and she removed to Newstead Abbey, the seat of the Byrons, which was in a state of much disrepair. Byron was sent to Harrow, where he was at first very miserable ; he excelled, however, as a swimmer and cricketer, in spite of his infirmity, and grew more contented, as he became conspicuous among his schoolfellows. He played for Harrow against Eton, with someone to run for him. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he succeeded in astonishing his contemporaries, a thing which always gave him satisfaction. His chief friends at the University were John Cam Hobhouse, afterwards Lord Broughton, and C. S. Matthews, a very talented man, who died young. One of the best traits in Byron's character was his constancy in friendship. He stayed at Cambridge about two years. In 1807 he published his juvenile poems, *Hours of Idleness*. Jeffrey came down upon the new author in his heavy-handed way, and Byron retorted in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, a striking example of his satiric power. Not content with assailing his critic, he expressed in this piece most unfavourable opinions of the poets of the day, several of which he afterwards modified. He lived for a time at Newstead, where he entertained his friends in a fashion which seems to have scandalised severer

neighbours, left England with Hobhouse in 1809, and was away for two years. Spain and the East of Europe, with its conflicting interests of Cross and Crescent, attracted him most. He was storing up material for his Eastern tales.

His mother died within a month of his return to England, and this, together with the deaths of Wingfield, an old schoolfellow, and Matthews, plunged him in deep grief. In London he found himself comparatively a stranger: but on the publication, in 1812, of the two first parts of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "he woke," in his own words, "to find himself famous." He became the idol of fashionable society, and encouraged by success wrote one poem after another—*The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *The Hebrew Melodies*, *The Siege of Corinth*, and *Parisina*. In January, 1815, took place his marriage with Miss Anne Milbanke. She was an heiress, and he was partially influenced by a desire to mend his fortunes. "They were certainly two very opposite people to come together," writes a contemporary, "but she would marry a poet and reform a rake." From Byron's letters it does not seem that the marriage was at first unhappy; but it was at least an anxious one. He was deeply in debt, and records that there were nine executions in his house within a year of his wedding. On the tenth of December a daughter, Augusta Ada, was born. Shortly afterwards Lady Byron went to her

parents' home in the north, and without any warning set to work to obtain a separation from her husband. Byron to the end of his life asserted that he never knew why she left him; he admitted no offence greater than an impatient word. Lady Byron alleged conduct which made his sanity questionable. What this conduct was never became commonly known, but all manner of rumours got abroad to Byron's discredit. Insanity could not be proved, but he was persuaded by threats of publicity to agree to a separation. Society was not slow to dethrone its idol. On the sixteenth of April, 1816, Byron left England for ever.

The real grounds of Lady Byron's action remain a mystery. But, whatever the provocation may have been, such a severance from what ought to have been a restraining influence could hardly fail to have a bad effect on any man, least of all on such a man as Byron. It intensified the cynicism which had probably grown upon him from boyhood. He was ready to console himself with whatever, as he may have put it, would help him to forget. An anodyne was quickly proffered. He joined the Shelleys on Lake Geneva, and Jane Clairmont, foster-sister to Shelley's wife, for a time held the first place in his affections. The sight of "Chillon's dungeons, deep and old," stirred him to one of his finest utterances, and he wrote the immortal *Prisoner* in the space of two wet days at Ouchy.

He next took up his abode at Venice, where he spent three years, during which he continued *Childe Harold*, wrote *Beppo*, and began *Don Juan*. Unhappily he here abandoned himself to prolonged excesses, on which he afterwards looked back with loathing. From these lowest depths he was rescued by his irregular connection with the Countess Guiccioli, whose attachment he returned, if not with equal devotion, yet with constancy. It was the opinion of his friends that this union made a better man of him. The Countess had been married straight from a convent to a man old enough to be her grandfather. Byron sojourned successively at Ravenna, where most of his dramas were written ; at Bologna, at Pisa, and at Genoa. He was present at the sombre obsequies of Shelley. He was deeply afflicted by the loss of his natural daughter, Allegra, in her sixth year. This was in 1822. He was restless, and entertained many projects : one of them was the establishment of a journal, *The Liberal*, to edit which Leigh Hunt was brought from England. Only four numbers appeared. In one of them was included the audacious *Vision of Judgment*, which was invited by Southey's poem of the same title.

The last scene of Byron's life was drawing on. He determined to throw in his lot with the Greek insurgents. At Missolonghi, in Ætolia, he set himself to organise the insurrectionary forces, of which he was named commander-in-chief. The place was a

swamp, illness attacked him, and he died before he could accomplish much ; but Greece has not forgotten that Byron gave his life for her independence, as truly as if he had fallen on the field of battle.

As a poet he is inevitably unequal, for he poured forth his works in careless and rapid profusion. He is magnificent at his best, but is often slovenly. He knew, as if instinctively, "what flame and power in writing is." He has splendid gifts of narrative and description ; he has pathos ; and he has sincerity.

# SHELLEY

1792-1822

**I**N Shelley's wonderful *Ode to the West Wind* there are three lines so pregnant with sorrow and self-knowledge that they form the aptest comment on his brief and stormy history.

“ I fall upon the thorns of life ! I bleed !  
A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd  
One too like thee : tameless, and swift, and proud.”

It is true that during his last few years he was comparatively at peace ; but the scars of old wounds never healed, wounds sustained in the many conflicts to which he was committed, in part by his own too hasty impulses, but also by the cruelty of circumstances and the harshness of an intolerant age.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at Field Place, Horsham. His father appears to have been obstinate and capricious, and incapable of understanding his son's sensitive and volcanic nature. Shelley's early experiences at a local school made him keenly alive to petty oppressions which most boys would have endured with a shrug of the shoulders. At Eton,



Shelley



later on, he persisted in refusing to fag. It appeared to his precocious intelligence that the tyrannies of school life were the reflection of what was everywhere going on in the world without. He has told us of the resolution he formed, as there came to him from a neighbouring classroom the sounds of "the harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes."

" And then I clasped my hands and looked around,  
But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,  
Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground,  
So without shame I spake :—' I will be wise  
And just and free and mild, if in me lies  
Such power, for I grow weary to behold  
The selfish and the strong still tyrannize  
Without reproach or check.' I then controlled  
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold." \*

Such a resolve is unimpeachable. But Shelley's ardent mind carried him insensibly to a dislike of all authority which interferes in any way with individual liberty, and to all systems which countenance such interference. Religion, therefore, in his view, was found wanting. In his first year at Oxford he wrote a pamphlet maintaining the necessity of atheism. It might have occurred to wise rulers that as the author was a boy of eighteen, it would have been well to reason with him, and, if possible, convince him of his errors. The authorities of

\* *Revolt of Islam*, introductory stanzas.

University College thought otherwise, and Shelley was summarily expelled.

In a similar spirit his father forbade him to return home. Thrown on his own resources, he took lodgings in London, and renewed an acquaintance with a schoolfellow of his sisters, which led to the worst error of his life, his first marriage. Harriet Westbrook, the daughter of a hotel-keeper, represented herself to Shelley as the victim of unkindness both at school and at home. This was quite enough to kindle his interest, and rather from sympathy and pity than from any deep affection he married her within a few months of leaving Oxford. The youthful pair settled at Keswick, where they found a friend in Southey, and afterwards lived for a time in Wales, at Lynmouth, where Shelley met Godwin, and at Bracknell. In 1812 there was much distress in Ireland, and Shelley visited that country in hopes of helping to alleviate it. Two children were born of this first marriage, Ianthe and Charles, but the union was not happy. The wife appears to have been shallow and frivolous. On the fourteenth of June, 1814, she left her husband. He was not slow to find a more congenial mate. On the twenty-eighth of July Mary Godwin left her home in Shelley's company. They crossed the Channel in an open boat, and spent some months in Switzerland. Godwin at first withheld forgiveness, although evincing a willingness to let Shelley be his banker.

In 1815 Shelley's father succeeded to the family estates and baronetcy, and saw fit to make his heir an allowance of £1,000 a year. The poet was thus freed from financial cares, and at once settled an annuity of £200 on Harriet Shelley. He lived some time in the neighbourhood of Windsor Forest, where *Alastor* was written, and then at Bath. Here he heard with consternation of the suicide of Harriet. A further shock was to ensue. He demanded the custody of his and her children, and it was refused. The matter came before the courts, and Lord Eldon decided that on account of his opinions he was not fit to have the care of his own children. These events preyed upon his health and spirits. Mary Godwin now became his legal wife. Their last home in England was at Marlow. It was a time of great depression in England. The sufferings of the poor were great, and the poor of Marlow found in Shelley a liberal and warm-hearted friend. He had always a passion for boating, and *The Revolt of Islam* was mainly written in his boat, as it floated along the Thames.

There were three children born of the second union, of whom the two first died in infancy. In 1818 the Shelleys left England for good. They sojourned successively at Como, Milan, Lucca, Venice, Este, Naples, and Rome. At Rome they were plunged in grief by the death of their eldest child, William. Their wanderings continued, but Shelley was con-

stantly at work upon his poems. Their last home was Casa Magni, near Lerici, on the Bay of Spezia. The house was close to the sea, with the shelter of a steep hill behind it. "The scene," writes Mrs. Shelley, "was of unimaginable beauty; the blue extent of waters, the almost land-locked bay, the near Castle of Lerici, shutting it in to the east, and distant Porto Venere to the west." Though beautiful, it was a wild and almost savage region. It harmonised entirely with the poet's mood, but his wife was oppressed with vague expectations of approaching misfortune.

Shelley had been to Pisa to visit Byron, and on the eighth of July, 1822, set out from Leghorn in his yacht on the return voyage to Lerici; a friend, Captain Williams, was with him. A sudden squall came on; the vessel was concealed from watchers on the shore, and when the storm cleared it was nowhere to be seen. It was ten days before the bodies were recovered; and on that wild shore they were cremated, in the presence of Byron, Leigh Hunt, and Trelawney, who had been friends of the dead. The ashes of Shelley were buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, where the body of Keats had been already laid.

Much of Shelley's poetry was inspired by the events of contemporary history and coloured by his political opinions. Often, too, as in *Julian and Maddolo* and *Epipsychedion*, he writes under the

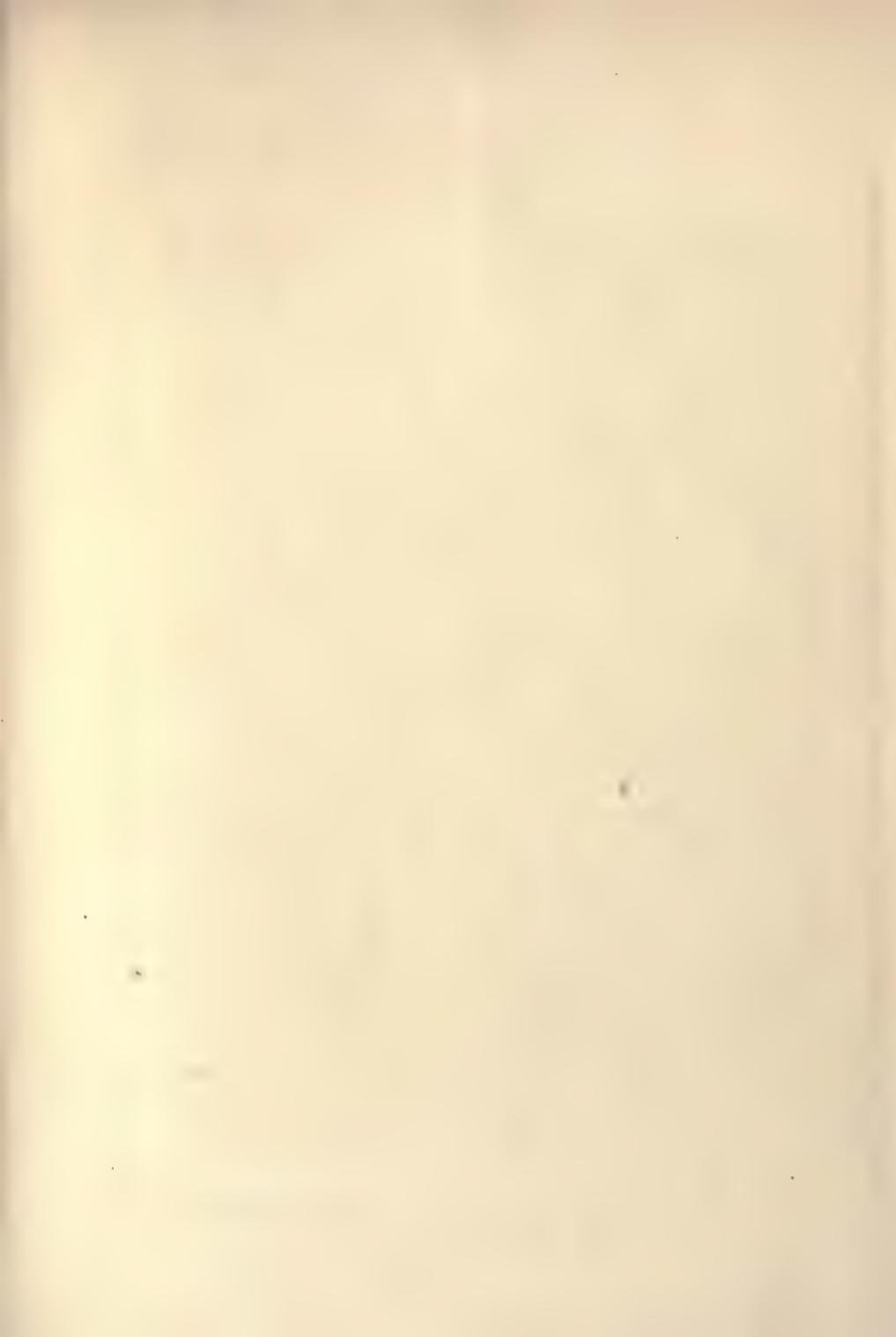
impulse of a personal impression. But there remains a large amount of his work which is quite impersonal and "of imagination all compact"; witness *The Cloud*, *The Skylark*, *The Witch of Atlas*, and many other lyrical outbursts. He would seem to be, in this mood, the most poetical of poets, if we are to hold by the Shakespearian definition; for at such times his eye

" Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name."

Is not that a just description of Shelley in his lyrical mood? As to his views on religion, so far as he chose to formulate them, they are to be sought not in *Queen Mab*, an early and rhetorical production, but in the closing stanzas of *Adonais*, that magnificent elegy which concludes with a prophecy, conscious or unconscious, of his own approaching death.

The amount of creative work which Shelley crowded into some half-dozen years is the more remarkable when it is considered that he had constant ill-health. The mistakes he made in the conduct of his life are patent, there is no need to underline them. But lest a false idea should be conveyed of one who was naturally gentle and benevolent, it is well to recall the words of her who may be supposed to have known him best, his wife.

“ His place among those who knew him intimately,” she wrote, “ has never been filled up. He walked beside them like a spirit of good, to comfort and benefit. It is our best consolation to know that such a pure-minded and exalted being was once among us, and now exists where we hope one day to join him ; although the intolerant, in their blindness, poured down anathemas, the Spirit of Good, who can judge the heart, never rejected him.”





*Keats*

# KEATS

1795-1821

JOHN KEATS was born in Moorfields, London, where his maternal grandfather owned a large livery stable. He lost both parents in boyhood, and after his mother's death concentrated the warmth of his affection on his brothers George and Thomas, who were both younger than himself. The boys were sent to school at Enfield, where they showed themselves spirited and pugnacious. Their favourite hero was an uncle who had fought on Duncan's ship at Camperdown, and the family reputation for courage had to be maintained. The future poet was fond of open-air life, and not specially studious. His sureness of touch in handling classic themes is the more remarkable from his never having learnt Greek. At fifteen he was apprenticed by his guardian to a surgeon at Edmonton, walked the hospitals, and in due time was qualified to practise. He gave up his profession from a dread of causing accidental injury to patients under operation. A literary life, moreover, may have had more attraction for him. While at Edmonton he had read *The Faery Queen* with

intense pleasure, and the creative impulse was already stirring in his mind. His friendship with Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of his Enfield master, brought him the acquaintance of Leigh Hunt, who was then editing *The Examiner*, Haydon the painter, and Ollier, a publisher. In such a circle his aspirations after authorship were heartily encouraged. His earliest printed verses appeared in *The Examiner*. He knew Shelley, though not intimately, and met Lamb and Wordsworth. In 1817 Ollier produced his first volume. Its contents are mainly tentative, though they include the fine sonnet, *On first looking into Chapman's Homer*, and show Keats to be a whole-hearted disciple of the Elizabethans. He was now at work on *Endymion*, which was published next year by Taylor and Hessey, who advanced him money in order that he might work with an easy mind. *Endymion* is clearly the product of an immature genius; it is too exclusively "a perpetual feast of nectar 'd sweets," but its promise is great and undeniable. It was favourably noticed by the Press, and appreciated by the author's friends. The historic onslaught in the *Quarterly* has acquired undue prominence from Byron's ill-considered lines. Nothing could be further from the truth than to say that Keats was "snuffed out by an article," but such legends die hard. A real grief was his parting with his brothers, of whom the elder married and emigrated to America and the younger died. He spent much of his time with Mr.

Charles Brown, a man some years his senior, who admired his poems and was anxious he should write more. He became engaged to a young West Indian lady, Miss Brawne, and was looking to letters for his future support. All might have been well, had not his health begun to fail. Keats felt too deeply for true ease of heart both the beauty and the sorrow of the world. His passionate attachment to Miss Brawne, together with the improbability of his being able to marry her, gave him little rest. Early in 1820 he became alarmingly ill. The rupture of a small blood-vessel was declared by his doctor to be unimportant; but his own knowledge of disease convinced him that he was doomed.

In the spring, however, he grew better, and occupied himself in preparing his third volume for the press. It contained much of his best work, *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Hyperion*. But the improvement in his health was only temporary. He was ordered abroad, and embarked for Italy in September, accompanied by a devoted friend, the artist Severn, whose portrait of him is here reproduced. When he had parted from Miss Brawne, the sense of approaching death came upon him with deepened force. "I eternally see her figure," he wrote to Brown, "eternally vanishing." After a storm at sea he read the shipwreck scene in *Don Juan*, but laid the book aside, angry at its cynicism. From Naples, after declining Shelley's warm invitation to visit him at Pisa, he

went to Rome, and there spent the last three months of his life. The consumption advanced rapidly. Sorrowfully aware of the contrast between what he had done and what he had hoped to do, he desired that the words "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" should be inscribed upon his tomb. No woman could have been a more patient and tender nurse than Severn ; and in his arms, on the twenty-third of February, 1821, Keats expired.

But his name was not "writ in water" ; it is written indelibly upon the scroll of English literature. What heights of poetic achievement he might have scaled, had he lived longer, it is vain to speculate ; but as it is, dying in his twenty-sixth year, he has left behind him poems which for sheer beauty of form, as well as for clarity of thought, are among the first in the language. The odes *To a Nightingale* and *On a Grecian Urn*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, these, to name only a few, mark him out, if the paradox be permissible, as the last of the Elizabethans—and not the least.





*Tennyson*

# TENNYSON

1809-1892

THE life of Tennyson was, in the ordinary sense of the word, uneventful. It pursued its course with the quiet and persistent flow of some broad, beneficent stream. His mission was to be a great poet, and with that mission he allowed nothing, not the dearest personal concerns, to interfere.

Alfred Tennyson was born at his father's rectory of Somersby, in Lincolnshire, a hamlet on the lower slope of one of those "long dun wolds" whose scenery and atmosphere form the background of so much that he wrote. He was the fourth of twelve children, and in a talented family was regarded by his father as displaying the most promise. He rhymed from childhood with surprising facility, composed at twelve an epic of six thousand lines in Scott's manner, and at fourteen a drama. As a small boy he attended Louth Grammar School for a few years, but had the main part of his education from his father, in whose good library he was free to browse at will. In 1827 he and his brother Charles persuaded a Louth book-

seller to publish *Poems by Two Brothers*. They received twenty pounds in payment, the half of it to be taken out in books. On the afternoon of publication they hired a trap with some of the money, and drove fourteen miles to Mablethorpe, their favourite haunt on the coast, and "shared their triumph with the winds and waves."

Next year the authors went up to Trinity College, Cambridge. Alfred Tennyson did not seek honours, but read widely. He won the prize poem on the unpromising subject of *Timbuctoo*. He belonged to an intellectual set, which included Spedding, Merivale, Monckton Milnes, and Arthur Henry Hallam, son of the historian, and knew that true delight which the mind feels, especially in youth, in discussing with kindred minds the things that are of real moment to humanity. While still at Cambridge he published also his first considerable volume, *Poems chiefly Lyrical*, and paid a visit to Spain in Hallam's company, which promised adventure; for their purpose was to assist Torrijos, the insurrectionary chief. But, singularly enough, no account of this expedition remains. Tennyson, however, brought back a vivid impression of Pyrenæan scenery, to be reproduced in *Œnone* and *The Lotos-Eaters*, as well as an affection for the cloak of the Spanish mountaineer, which became his constant garb, and may be seen in so many of the portraits.

He left Cambridge in 1831 owing to his father's

illness and, as it turned out, approaching death. The Tennysons continued to reside at Somersby Rectory for six years. *The Lady of Shalott, and other Poems*, which appeared in 1832, more than confirmed the promise of the earlier volume. Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's nearest friend, was much at Somersby, for he had become engaged to one of the poet's sisters. The sudden death of Hallam in 1833 was a crushing blow to brother and sister. Tennyson regarded Hallam as a greater mind than himself, and there can be no doubt that death cut short a career of singular promise. It is certain that no friendship ever had a nobler monument than *In Memoriam*.

Tennyson continued to live with his mother and sisters at Somersby, occasionally visiting Cambridge, and moved with them, in 1837, first to Tunbridge Wells and then to Boxley, near Maidstone. In that year he became engaged to Miss Emily Sellwood, whose sister had married his brother Charles, but the engagement terminated after three years, for Tennyson saw no prospect of being able to marry. Not even for this object would he swerve from the course he had marked out—he would write poetry or nothing. Ten years elapsed between the publication of his second and third volume. *Locksley Hall* and *English Idylls* won for the new volume great and immediate popularity. *The Princess* followed in 1847, *In Memoriam* in 1850. This was an eventful time for the poet. He met Miss Sellwood again after a

separation of ten years ; his works now promised him a substantial income, and they married.

The year 1851 was signalised by Tennyson's being appointed poet laureate, and by the appearance of the *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*. This poem, whose greatness is now universally admitted, failed by some incomprehensible freak of criticism to please contemporary opinion. The poet and his wife spent some time in travelling, and then settled at Farringford, in the Isle of Wight, their beautiful and favourite home. Here *The Charge of the Light Brigade* was written, and there was no jarring note in the unstinted approbation of the Crimean troops. *Maud*, published in 1855, had to win its way to popularity. *The Idylls of the King* (1858) took the reading world by storm.

After a time Tennyson turned his attention to drama, and wrote some half-dozen plays, the best of which, *Queen Mary* and *Becket*, had a fair success upon the stage. Meanwhile his devotion to his art had had the somewhat unusual effect of making him a rich man. He built Aldworth, his house on Blackdown, amid the Surrey Hills, where, and at Farringford, he passed his life happily in the companionship of his wife and sons, and enjoyed visits from many eminent people. Further volumes appeared at intervals ; *The Revenge* (1880) and *Teiresias* (1885) showed no waning of power. *Crossing the Bar*, a

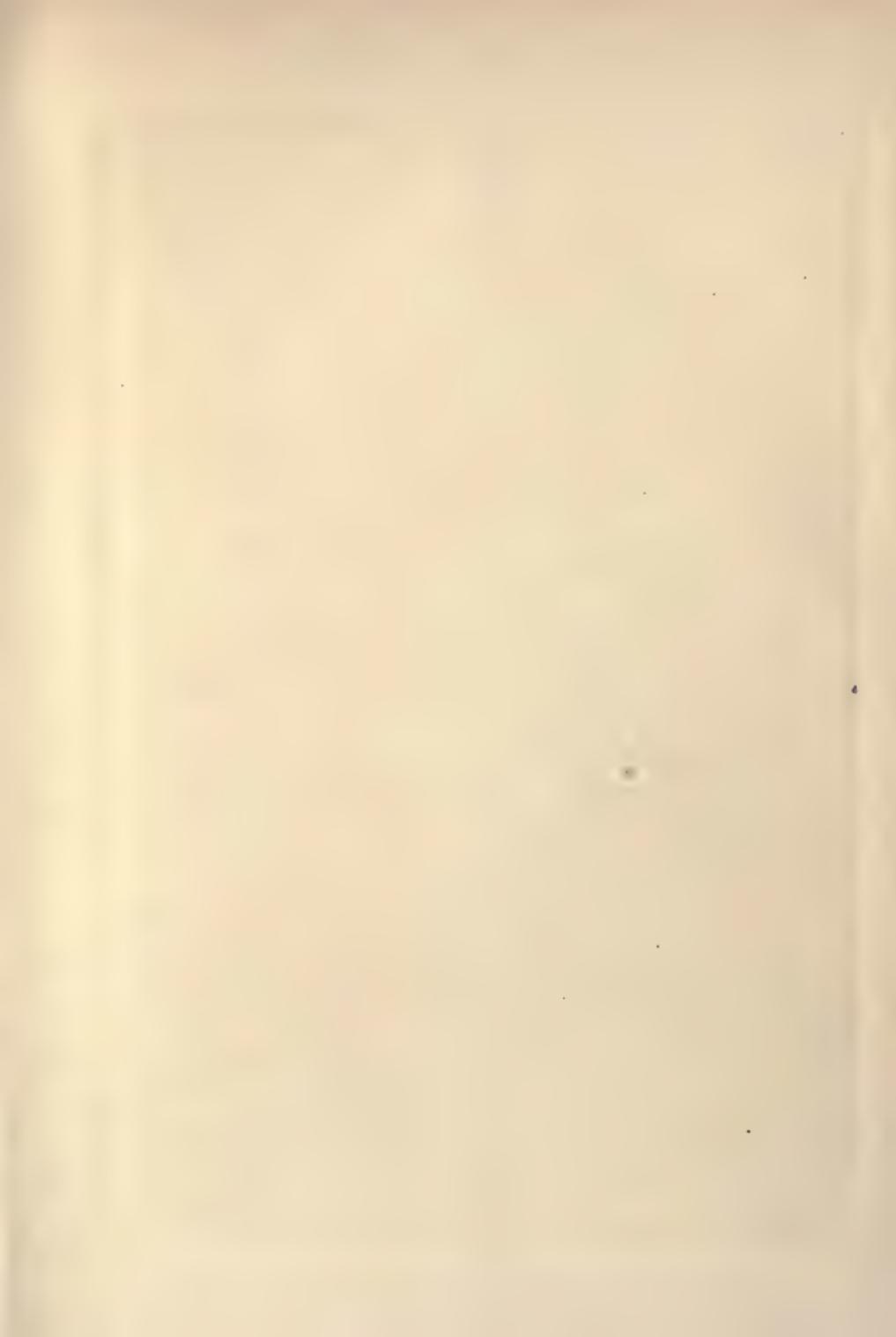
wonderful lyric of farewell, which was written in 1889, "came to him," he said, "in a moment."

There are few other incidents to record. In 1883 he accepted a peerage, and the same year went for a cruise with Mr. Gladstone, on the *Pembroke Castle*, to the Orkneys, Norway, and Denmark. In 1886 he lost his second son, Lionel, and two years later had a serious illness. From this he recovered, but in 1892 his life gradually declined. In his son's *Memoir* there is a noble and moving description of the closing scene.

The mere enumeration of his chief works is, to those who know them, a sufficient indication of Tennyson's poetic stature. He is the greatest poetic voice of a great epoch ; his fame can never fade, so long as the Victorian era is remembered. He may be described as the most national of our poets since Shakespeare. He was, above all things, a patriot ; and no crisis in his country's history failed to stir him to sympathetic and powerful utterance. Further, he was the interpreter of the thought of his age ; it was his to crystallise in many a pellucid phrase what others were feeling dimly and partially, especially in the sphere of religion, and so to lead men onwards towards "the mount of vision." Probably no other English poet has exercised so wide a spiritual influence. With all this he is, first and last, an artist. There is nothing careless or slipshod in his work, no matter what the subject. Whether in his dialect

poems, with their depths of humour and pathos, in the exquisite lyrics of *Maud*, or in his speculations on the remotest themes, the unerring touch of a great artist is everywhere perceptible.

Admirable as a poet, he is equally to be admired as a man. A devoted son, husband, and father: a loyal friend, with nothing weightier to his charge than that he was at times "a little rough in conversation": how many great men can lay stronger claims to our affection and remembrance?





*Browning*

# BROWNING

1812-1889

CAMBERWELL, Robert Browning's birthplace, was in 1812 a leafy region with an outlook upon the country. That is changed now, and Dulwich Wood, where he was wont to ponder and compose, has given place to bricks and mortar. In this neighbourhood the greater part of his youth was spent, for he was not sent to Public School or University. For four years he attended a school at Peckham, and after fourteen studied with a tutor at home. His father, who was in the Bank of England, was a man of considerable culture, to whom his son's education was a matter of keen interest. Browning attended lectures at University College, Gower Street, but for no long time. Of his early verse *Pauline*, published anonymously in 1833, alone survives. It shows him as an intense admirer of Shelley and his works.

He now set out for a year's travel on the Continent, visiting Russia and then Italy, the country where so much of his life was to be spent. *Paracelsus* was published in 1835, and among other reviewers who

welcomed it was John Forster, who became the poet's staunch friend. Browning also came to know Macready, at whose suggestion *Strafford* was written. It was produced at Covent Garden Theatre on the first of May, 1837, and ran for five nights. Macready played Strafford and Miss Helen Faucit Lady Carlisle; but the piece was poorly staged, and hardly had a fair chance. From this time until his marriage Browning's headquarters were still at Camberwell, and he wrote much, including *Sordello*, *Pippa Passes* (one of his best poems), *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, and many of the *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Dramatic Romances*.

The romantic story of his marriage has been often told. He made the acquaintance of Miss Elizabeth Barrett through her cousin, Mr. John Kenyon, a true friend to them both. For some time they corresponded without meeting; but in 1846 they met at Mr. Barrett's house in Wimpole Street. Miss Barrett, always delicate, had received a severe shock from the death by drowning of a favourite brother, and was a prisoner to the sofa, without much apparent prospect of ever escaping from it. So, at any rate, her father thought: and when presently Browning proposed marriage, he would not hear of it. Browning, however, was convinced that only heroic remedies could avail, and Miss Barrett chose to be guided by his determination. On the twelfth of September, 1846, they were quietly married at St. Mary-le-bone Church, and left for France. Mr. Barrett never

forgave their action, and was permanently estranged ; but his daughter was recalled to life, to a life, moreover, of singular and beautiful happiness. Her health in a large measure returned, and some idea of the perfect companionship which she found in marriage may be gathered from the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, written at Pisa, under whose title's thin disguise the story of her own heart is told. The Brownings made their home at Casa Guidi, in Florence ; here *Aurora Leigh* was written, and here, in 1849, their son was born. In 1851 they visited England, and spent the winter in Paris, where Browning's father was now living. Of the remainder of their married life there is little to record ; they wrote poetry, travelled in Italy and sympathised with its aspirations after unity, occasionally visited England, had their permanent home at Casa Guidi, and were happy. This chapter of the poet's life was closed by his wife's death, on the twenty-eighth of June, 1861.

Browning never feared death ; to him it was, in Chaucer's phrase, "the green pathway to life." And he was passionately convinced that the parting was only for a time. Meanwhile the rest of his life on earth was to be lived, the rest of his work was to be done. He confronted the future with native courage, and, in course of time, with serenity. He exchanged Florence for London, where, after their father's death in 1866, his sister joined him. He lived in Kensington, first at Warwick Crescent and

later at de Vere Gardens. He went into society a great deal, kept up his interest in the arts, knew "everybody," and was extremely popular. There could hardly be a greater contrast than between such a life and that chosen by the other great contemporary poet, but it is pleasant to know that Browning and Tennyson were friends, and always ready to be interested in each other's work.

To return to Browning's. *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* and *Men and Women* were notable volumes which appeared during his married life. *Dramatis Personæ* was published in 1864, *The Ring and the Book* in 1868, *Balaustion's Adventure* in 1871. The mere amount of Browning's verse is remarkable, apart from any considerations as to its quality. He never ceased from composition as long as life lasted. It is hardly necessary to mention here the names of the later volumes, which followed one another in regular succession. The greatest of his works have been already named; devoted admirers are familiar with the titles of those which remain, and those who have yet to make acquaintance with the poet should do so by means of the two volumes of selections which he himself prepared. By 1871 the best of his work was finished, though there are naturally in his later books passages and poems—*Clive*, to name but one—of conspicuous merit. Browning was staying at Venice, in his son's house, when his splendid health at last broke down; and on his death-bed he heard with

pleasure of the favourable reception of his last volume, *Asolando*. In its final poem he has given us the ultimate expression of what he believed and what he was :—

“One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would  
triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.”

The last poet in our collection bids farewell to us in tones of hope and courage. It is a noble utterance with which to leave him. Yet, before we part from him, an attempt may be made to indicate, however faintly, his strength and weakness in the domain of poetry.

Browning never wrote a play of quite the first rank, but his genius was essentially dramatic. Read, for example, *A Forgiveness*, if you wish to be assured of that. His lyrics, his romances, his idylls, his *Men and Women*, all are dramas in little. True, many of them have externally little dramatic action ; but the soul of man is the scene, and conflicting passions, hopes, and fears, the players. Take any vital passage from his longer poems—for instance, Pompilia’s story in *The Ring and the Book*—and the same feeling of drama is suggested. The true greatness of Browning is his extraordinary insight into the hearts of men and women. Another excellence,

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which, however, often fails him, is his command of language and metre. It has been contended by some, whose opinion is not to be lightly disregarded, that much that he wrote is not poetry at all. And this is probably true. Nevertheless, it is hard to parallel the haunting and individual beauty of many of his shorter poems. Oblivion will very likely submerge a vast amount of his philosophic musings; but there is surely much of his work which for its beauty, its power, and its pulsating humanity, will survive.





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